

The Two Witnesses

By Brad Allison on 7/18/2004

Scripture Reference *Revelation 8-11*

As we've pointed out before, the purpose of the book of Revelation is to unveil the future. By way of review, it does so by describing the general characteristics of our current age, which characteristics will escalate just prior to the coming of Christ. For example, it says that there will be tribulations that generally characterize this entire age between the first and second comings of Christ. But tribulation will increase greatly just before Jesus returns. These things are not revealed to us simply to satisfy our curiosity about the future. Rather, it was written to a suffering church in order to bring comfort and hope in the midst of significant persecution.

The theme of this morning's passage in Revelation 11 is what theologians call the church militant. We are fighting a war, with all the powers of hell and earth allied against us. But the truth is that we are like many Americans who find themselves fighting in Iraq today. They joined the National Guard in order to supplement their income or get an education, and all of a sudden they find bullets whizzing overhead and bombs exploding all around. As difficult as it may be to find oneself in a battle zone, an even worse situation is to be in the middle of a war and not even know it. Our passage this morning leaves no uncertainty about this. Listen to what Jack Miller said about this warfare in a letter he wrote to another pastor.

"All the powers of hell and earth are ranged against the gospel and your ministry. They will not compromise. Therefore don't expect it from them. Don't expect the enemy to coddle you. He will continue to attack from every quarter. At night. On the streets. In your meetings. Wherever. This is a take-no-prisoners kind of war, and we must not compromise with the uglies and with evil in any form." (*The Heart of a Servant Leader*, p. 62).

The passage outlining this theme of warfare, Revelation 11, is probably the most difficult in the entire book. The primary difficulty lies in identifying these two witnesses who figure so prominently in the passage. There are basically two camps of interpretation surrounding this. The first camp sees these two witnesses as two literal individuals, the specific identify of which varies widely. The other camp sees them as symbolic of various groups. I find myself in the symbolic camp for several reasons. First, almost everything else in the passage is clearly symbolic, including the temple (v. 1-2), the two olive trees and lampstands (v. 4) and the great city (v. 8). Second, we read that the beast "will make war on them and conquer them" (v. 7), and that's the kind of language one would use to describe a group of people, not just two individuals.

So if these two witnesses are intended to represent some group, who is it they represent? Based on several points in this description, I think they represent the true church, the one that enters warfare by witnessing faithfully to her Lord. The passage itself, then, describes the familiar plotline of this warfare. It has three points to it, the same three points that are often characteristic of good battle stories. Point one is that of early success as the church witnesses for her Lord. Point two is the increase of opposition to the point that the defeat of the good guys seems certain. Point three is the deliverance that comes at the darkest moment. Let's look now at these three points as they are developed in our passage.

I. The Battle Is Entered with Early Success

Our passage describes two weapons that are available to the church which will bring it success in this great conflict. The two weapons are the gospel and prayer, though neither are

described in that kind of straightforward way. The gospel is implied simply in this word “witness”. A witness is one who testifies to the truth that is found in Jesus. That is the gospel, the good news that Jesus has come to redeem needy, helpless sinners. Our problem, though, is that we undervalue this weapon of the gospel. We think it insignificant and irrelevant to the real enemies facing us. So two images are used in an attempt to increase our confidence in the potency of this weapon.

The first image that speaks about the potency of the gospel is this statement in verse 4 that says that the two witnesses are the two olive trees and the two lampstands. A general principle that really helps in the study of this book, whenever there is something that is hard to understand, is to look for an occurrence of that same image or language somewhere in the Old Testament. In this case, this clearly comes from a vision in Zechariah 4 that consists of three parts. There is the lampstand that burns brightly as a symbol of the light of God. Then the lampstand has a large bowl above it, from which fuel is supplied to the lamps in order to keep them burning. Finally, there are two olive trees, one on each side of the bowl in order to supply it with a perpetual source of olive oil. The meaning of it is that well-known verse that follows this vision. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). Here’s what God is saying, “You may tend to look down on the gospel and its power, but you need to know that I have purposed to use this very thing to be my light to the world.

The second image he uses to speak of the power of the gospel is the image of fire coming out of the mouth. This fire speaks of the power of the word of the gospel. It can heal, or it can destroy, depending on the heart of the one who hears it. God says in this verse that it will destroy those who seek to bring harm to his people. I don’t think he means by this a literal destruction, but the more significant spiritual destruction.

So our first weapon is the gospel. Our second weapon is prayer, spoken of figuratively in verse 6 as having the power to shut the sky, that no rain might fall, and to turn water into blood and strike the earth with every kind of plague. I think this refers to prayer because of what is said after the seventh seal was opened. We read that there was an angel, who “was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (8:3-5). When God’s people pray, the earth shakes. I don’t think Revelation 11 teaches us to pray for plagues and water turning to blood. Rather, we simply pray that the kingdom of God would come. Since the kingdom usually comes only through some significant disruption in our lives, the result is that things begin to shake as we pray.

Illustration: During an earthquake some years ago, the inhabitants of a small village were understandably shaken. But they were also surprised at the calmness and apparent joy of an old woman whom they all knew. So one of them asked the woman, “Mother, are you not afraid?” “No,” she said, “I rejoice to know that I have a God who can shake the world.”

You’re in a war, and God has given you two weapons to use, and only two. They are the gospel and prayer. Are you using them? What does it look like to use them? Three things describe what it looks like. First, it means that you regard a wartime status as normal. To quote Jack Miller again, “Don’t expect the enemy to coddle you. He will continue to attack from every quarter.” Second, it means that you will need to fight every day to remember that you are loved by your Father in heaven. He is for you, and you need to drink of that perpetually, just like the olive trees that give perpetual oil to the lamps.

Illustration: On a port call in the Philippines, someone spotted the driver of a wagon overtaking an old man carrying a very heavy load. Having compassion on him, the driver invited the old man to ride in the wagon for free. Gratefully the old man accepted. He got in the wagon and held to the hand railing, but never set down his heavy load. If you're going to use the weapon of the gospel, you've got to put down your load. What is the load? It's a load of unlimited obligation, or of always just thinking you have to try harder if God is to approve of you. You've got to lay it down and rest in Jesus right now. The olive trees provide a present supply of oil for the light of the gospel. Remember that and then live like you believe it before others, testifying out of the joy of your own liberation.

Third, it means shaking the earth through your prayers. Remember that God has determined to use the prayers of his people, not the strengths of his people, to accomplish his work.

II. The Tide Turns and Defeat Seems Certain

As God's people use these weapons of the gospel and prayer, God causes his kingdom to prosper and succeed. But as always happens in most stories, the forces of evil do not let this success go unchallenged. There is always a counterattack. We read of that counterattack in verse 7, which tells of a beast that rises from the bottomless pit to make war on the witnesses. He succeeds in his counterattack more than we might expect, because he is able to "conquer them and kill them" (v. 7). More than that, he subjects them to what is in the Eastern culture a great indignity. He denies a proper burial for their bodies.

Who is this beast who kills the witnesses? He is the one spoken of in Daniel 7, the most terrifying of all four of the beasts in Daniel's vision, and the one we know more commonly as the "Antichrist". The Bible speaks of many antichrists who will exist throughout history. But it also makes it clear that there is one who will be released upon the earth just prior to the Second Coming of Jesus. That's the one being spoken of here.

Note how the followers of Jesus will be thought of in that day as a big problem for the world. There will be widespread rejoicing when the witnesses are killed. That is, when the church is removed from the world, many will celebrate because they think the group that has kept them from doing what they want to do is now completely gone. Does that theme sound familiar to you? It has been around for a long time. Christians were blamed for the fall of Rome because they had led the empire to forsake their traditional gods. We see it also in our own day. Let me read you these words from Robert Reich, a cabinet member in the Clinton administration.

The great conflict of the 21st century will not be between the West and terrorism. Terrorism is a tactic, not a belief. The true battle will be between modern civilization and anti-modernists; between those who believe in the primacy of the individual and those who believe that human beings owe their allegiance and identity to a higher authority; between those who give priority to life in this world and those who believe that human life is mere preparation for an existence beyond life; between those who believe in science, reason and logic and those who believe that truth is revealed through Scripture and religious dogma. Terrorism will disrupt and destroy our lives. But terrorism itself is not the greatest danger we face (*The American Prospect*, 7-1-04, www.prospect.org).

III. Deliverance Comes at the Darkest Moment

Things cannot get any darker than death, can they? Here we have portrayed for us a time when the two witnesses, symbolizing the true church, are dead. Surely all hope has been

lost. But then we read in verse 11 that a breath of life from God entered them after the three and half days. I won't have time to explain this, but let me just say that this time reference of three and half days or years is a biblical way of explaining a period of time when evil seems to rule unhindered. It comes from a time when an evil Syrian ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes entered the O.T. temple and desecrated it for 42 months, in the years 167-164 BC. Following that time when evil seemed to have all the power, God will raise up the witnesses and in a visible way bring them home to heaven. The result will be that all will give glory to God.

There are two kinds of stories with happy endings. In the first type, bad things happen to the protagonists, the good guys, until in the end they are delivered. In the second type, bad things also happen to the good guys and they are delivered from them. But in this second type of story, the bad things themselves are used to bring about the happy ending. Back in the book of Genesis, Joseph seems to have everything go against him. He has brothers who hate him and sell him into slavery, a lady of the house who falsely accuses him of trying to rape her, and he's rotting away in an Egyptian prison. But then, by the end of the story, Joseph has become the Prime Minister of Egypt. Notice how every single one of these things that seemed so tragic at the time led to this precise outcome. Do you also recognize in that the central story of Christianity? The one who came as the Messiah had everything go wrong at the end of his life, resulting finally in a charge of treason that led to his execution. All seemed to be lost, but then God raised him from the dead and used his very death as the means of bringing about the greatest victory of all time. Evil has been defeated. Satan once more has overreached and has been defeated just when he thinks he has won. Moreover, his evil efforts become the source of God's victory. That's exactly what happens in this story. The Antichrist executes the true church, but God raises them up and brings all men to glorify his name.

Remember that the book of Revelation introduces these themes that will characterize the end of the age just prior to Jesus' return, but that these things are present in lesser form throughout the current age. In other words, this is the story of our lives. Haven't you found it to be so in your life? Perhaps there's a divorce, and all seems dark and hopeless. But in time you notice that God not only delivered you from that hopelessness, but he also used the divorce itself as the means of bringing about the deliverance.

CONCLUSION:

I want to close with two applications of this. First, recognize that God does things like this in order that we might trust in him rather than ourselves. He allows things to get to a hopeless condition and then brings deliverance that we might learn to trust in him rather than ourselves. So the first application is trust him rather than yourself for such deliverance.

Second, be filled with hope. There's a story about a boy and his father who were planning a fishing trip for the next day. That evening, as the father was putting his son to bed, the boy hugged his father's neck and said, "Daddy, thank you for tomorrow." Let's look to the Lord now and thank him for tomorrow, no matter how bleak your today may be.