Our Eternal Destiny is Secure

Revelation 11

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| **Natural Divisions** | * Revelation 11:1-6 God tells John to measure the Holy Place of the temple and to count the worshippers, and God gives power for proclaiming the truth to His two witnesses. * Revelation 11:7-14 The beast attacks the witnesses and kills them, but after 3½ days, God resurrects them and carries them to heaven. * Revelation 11:13-14 An earthquake destroys a large portion of the ungodly city, and kills 7000 people. * Revelation 11:15-19 As the seventh trumpet is sounded, the twenty-four elders announce the events that will accompany the inauguration of God’s ultimate kingdom, and they praise God for His reign, His wrath, His judgment, and His reward. |
| **Summary Sentence** | God empowers and protects two witnesses who proclaim His truth during the Tribulation period, and when their testimony is complete, He allows the beast to overpower and kill them, but after 3½ days, God resurrects them, carries them to heaven, sends an earthquake to judge their enemies, and allows the seventh trumpet to be sounded. |
| **Central Idea** | Believers may suffer, but our eternal destiny is secure |

No introduction today; let’s get started. Open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 11.

One thing I’d like to do today is to share with you some of the challenges we face in interpreting this book.

In chapter 11 we find reference to the temple, to the Holy City, and to two witnesses who are killed by the beast and then resurrected and caught up to heaven after 3½ days. In chapter 11 we find reference to a devastating earthquake, the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the coming of the Kingdom of God, the return of Christ, and the final judgment. That’s a lot of stuff going on.

How are we to understand these things?

Are these elements in chapter 11 to be taken literally, or do we take them as symbols? Are the descriptive words we find in the chapter literal? Or are they to be taken figuratively? This dilemma plagues us in all of our study of Revelation.

Here is our problem. Much of the book of Revelation is something that is called *apocalyptic.* The name of the book is the Apocalypse. We don’t understand apocalyptic writing. We don’t have apocalyptic books as a part of our literary culture, but the first century Jews did. Apocalyptic books in that day made extensive use of symbolism and dramatic images to convey a fairly mysterious message. You expect to find fantastic images in apocalyptic writing.

The book of Revelation is very similar in many ways to apocalyptic writings, but it’s very *different* in that Revelation declares itself to be the Word of God. Other apocalyptic writings are just literature; but the book of Revelation is prophecy. Revelation is the Word of God. Revelation is given to reveal truth; not to hide it.

We would be most comfortable if the book of Revelation were narrative in form and if it were written in chronological order, but it isn’t. We would love it if it read like a history book, but it doesn’t. So it’s a challenge to us to understand how to interpret the book of Revelation. Revelation is hard.

Let me be clear about one thing. As I read the Bible, my approach to understanding the Bible is very literal. When I read the words on the page, if the normal, literal sense of those words makes sense, then I’m not looking for any other meaning. I believe the Bible is true; I believe that it’s the Word of God. If the Bible says that Jesus walked on water; I believe He walked on water. If it says that God brought two of every animal to the ark, I believe He brought two of every animal to the ark.

But Revelation is hard. Revelation is hard because it’s full of symbolic language. It’s full of figurative images. It’s full of Old Testament allusions.

We can get the main idea; we can understand the sovereignty of God that’s revealed in this book. We can see the glorious hope that is ours, and the beauty of the coming of God’s kingdom. We all get the *main* idea, but we don’t all agree about the details.

So with all that in mind, let’s very carefully begin to consider the text.

Look at verses 1-2. *“Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, ‘Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months.’”*

There are two main approaches to this chapter. Either the temple, the altar, and the Holy City have something to do with the Jewish people and their place in plan of God, or John is referring to the people of faith—the Christian church—during a time of intense suffering.

Both of these views have scholarly support, but both of them have problems. You’re going to see one view in your CBS commentary, and I’m going to give you a different view this morning. But whatever view you take, the central message of Revelation 11 is the same: God’s Kingdom is coming, and God guarantees the eternal destiny of His people. **Believers may suffer, but their eternal destiny is secure**.

Revelation 11 begins with a reference to the temple of God, and it ends with a reference to the temple of God. We call this an *inclusio*, and it’s a way of bracketing a section of text. It begins with the temple; it ends with the temple.

What is meant by the temple? What concept does a reference to the *temple* represent? In the Old Testament, God was present with His people first within a tabernacle, and later within a sacred chamber inside the temple of God in Jerusalem. That chamber was called the Holy of Holies, and God was present with His people there.

The most important attribute of the *temple* was that the *temple* was the place where God dwelled. God was present with His people within the temple.

Then in the course of time, as the people of Israel became more and more wicked, God judged His people. God’s presence left the temple of God. The *glory* of God, which was the visible manifestation of God’s presence, left the temple in Jerusalem. God’s glory left the temple, and then the temple was destroyed and God’s people were carried off into captivity in Babylon. This was over 500 years before the time of Christ.

Eventually, the people of God returned to Jerusalem. They rebuilt the temple of God, but God’s visible presence never returned to the temple. The temple in Jerusalem was a magnificent building. It was a place to come and worship; it was a place to offer sacrifices; it was a place to come and learn about God—but the glory of God had never returned. The glory of God was not there. The Holy of Holies was empty. There was nothing in the temple that indicated that God was present with His people.

God did return to His people, but He returned in an unexpected form. God returned in the form of a man. God the Son became a man; He was born in Bethlehem. Jesus is God the Son, and Jesus came to dwell among God’s people. In Jesus, God was present with His people again.

In the first century, God’s presence was not in the temple; God’s presence was in His Son.

After the ascension of Christ, the New Testament consistently teaches that the temple of God is the body of believers. The temple of God is the church—it is the set of all true people of faith.

1 Cor. 3:16-17 says this: *“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him, for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”*

When the believers of the first century heard these first two verses of Revelation chapter 11, they wouldn’t have thought it referred to a rebuilt Jewish temple. They would have assumed that the temple of God is the body of Christ. The temple of God is the church. They understood that from 1 Corinthians and from Ephesians.

At the end of Ephesians 2, believers are told that we are members of God’s household—that the apostles and prophets are the foundation; that Christ is the cornerstone, and that *“the whole structure..is growing into a holy temple in the Lord. (we)…are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Holy Spirit.”*

The temple of God on earth is the community of believers. The temple of God on earth is the church.

In Revelation chapter 11, in verses 1 and 2, we have a distinction between *the temple and the altar* and the *court outside the temple*. We’ve seen *the temple and altar* before in the book of Revelation. In Revelation chapter 6, those who had been slain for their witness to Christ were beneath the *altar*, and the *altar* was in heaven. In Revelation chapter 7 those believers throughout history who had remained faithful unto death were serving God day and night in His temple, and the *temple of God* was in heaven. At the end of chapter 11, the *temple of God* that will be opened after the seventh trumpet sounds is in heaven.

In fact, every place in the book of Revelation where the word naos, meaning *temple*, or *sanctuary*, is used, it refers to the dwelling place of God in heaven.

So what does it mean to *“measure”* the temple? In that day, the act of measuring implies a guarantee of protection. These believers who stand in the presence of God in heaven are protected for all eternity. These believers who have lived and died standing firm in the faith will enjoy the presence of God forever. In Revelation 3:12, we were told that those who stand firm in the faith will be a *pillar* in the *temple of God*—the *temple of God* in heaven. These believers in heaven experienced suffering in their lives—as all of us do; nevertheless, **their eternal destiny is secure**.

Verse 2 says that the *court outside* of the temple is *not* to be measured and that the *holy city* is going to be trampled on by the *nations* for 42 months. What does this mean?

This reference to the *court outside of the temple* changes our focus from heaven to earth. Believers who have died are enjoying the presence of God within the sanctuary of God in heaven. Believers who are still on earth are in the *court outside of the God’s temple*, and our passage reveals that during these last days, *the holy city* is going to suffer. The *holy city* is going to be trampled on by the *nations* for 42 months.

In the book of Revelation, the term *holy city* refers to the city of God as opposed to the city of man. It refers to the people of faith as opposed to the people of darkness.

The term *nations* refers to unbelievers, to earth-dwellers, to the heathen. So verse 2 is saying that at the end of the age, the community of faith is going to be trampled on by the ungodly for 42 months. Nevertheless, we know that even though **believers may suffer, their eternal destiny is secure**.

Now in verses 3-12 John describes the activity of His people—His witnesses—on the earth.

During this time of intense persecution, there will be two witnesses who will proclaim the Word of the Lord. When evil men try to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. I don’t take that literally; I believe that *fire* refers to the concept of judgment. God brings judgment on those who seek to harm His witnesses.

God’s witnesses during this time have the power to perform signs and wonders like those performed by Elijah and Moses. God’s witnesses will have the power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain, and they will have the power to pronounce plagues on the earth. During these last days, God’s witnesses will have prophetic power and authority that we have not seen before in the church age. It will be obvious that these witnesses possess power from God. And yet, that will not deter those who desire to silence the Word of God.

Who are these witnesses? Some say they are Moses and Elijah. Some say they are Peter and Paul. Some say they represent the entire community of faith in that final day.

Why might we say that? Why might we say that these two witnesses are the entire community of faith at that time?

Well, in verse 4 they’re called lampstands, and in chapter 1 of Revelation, the lampstands are the churches—communities of faith. These witnesses are also called olive trees, and both olive trees and lampstands serve as an allusion to Zechariah 4:14. In Zechariah 4, the olive trees refer to the priest who serves the Lord and to the kingly figure—the prince—who serves the Lord. In the church age, all believers constitute a kingdom of priests. All believers are priests who will reign with Christ.

So what we have is a variety of views about the witnesses. Some believe that the two witnesses are two prophets who have returned with power at the end of the age. Some believe that these two witnesses represent the entire community of faith, and that all believers will have the powers that have been described here.

Why are there two witnesses? In the first century, two witnesses were required to affirm the truth of a matter in a legal proceeding.

Beginning in verse 7 we see the apparent defeat of these witnesses. Look at verse 7: *“When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war with them, and overcome them and kill them.”* This is the first occurrence in the book of Revelation of anything called *“the beast.”* This image would have brought to mind the terrifying beast described in the book of Daniel, in Daniel chapter 7. Daniel had a vision of a terrifying beast that would come at the end of the age and wage war against the saints—against all of God’s people—and this terrifying beast would defeat them. This allusion supports the interpretation of the end-times witnesses as being *all* of the community of faith.

We’re going to learn more about this beast later, but for now, all we need to know is that he is a powerful tool of Satan that is sent to destroy God’s people.

This beast attacks God’s witnesses and kills them, and the ungodly world rejoices.

Look at verses 8-10: *“And their dead bodies* will lie *in the street of the great city which symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. Those from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations* will *look at their dead bodies for three and a half days, and will not permit their dead bodies to be laid in a tomb. And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth.”*

In the culture of the Ancient Middle East, the worst humiliation a person could suffer from his enemies would be for his body to be exposed to the scavengers of the land. This is the ultimate display of contempt. This is the way the ungodly of the earth treat the people of God. And there will be judgment for this—very soon.

I have just one more detail to cover before we move on. Where are these bodies lying? Where are these dead witnesses lying unburied?

Verse 8 says that they are in *the great city*, which elsewhere in Revelation is the term that refers to Babylon—Babylon the Great. But it doesn’t refer to the historical city of Babylon; rather, Babylon is a *concept* that refers to man’s hedonism and idolatry and rejection of God. *Babylon* is the term that refers to mankind standing in defiance of God and rejecting the Kingdom of God.

The witnesses who’ve been defeated are lying in *the great city*—Babylon. Verse 8 tells us more about this city. It is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt and the place where our Lord was crucified. Again, these terms represent *concepts*, not geographical cities. We understand these concepts by looking back in the Old Testament to see what characterized these places.

Sodom represents godlessness and immorality. Egypt represents persecution and the enslavement of God’s people. The place where our Lord was crucified was Jerusalem, but what concept does this represent? It represents rejection of God’s Kingdom. It represents the ultimate in rebellion against the plan of God.

So the witnesses have been defeated by the opposition of the beast, and their bodies are treated with utter contempt in the places where God is also treated with contempt.

After 3 and a half days, these witnesses will be resurrected to life. A voice from heaven will call them to come up, and they will ascend into heaven in a cloud, just as Jesus did. In this event God dramatically proves the power of His promise. **Although believers may suffer, their eternal destiny is secure**. God’s witnesses are caught up to heaven to be in God’s presence forever.

At that point there will be a great earthquake, and many will be killed. The survivors will be terrified, and then there will be the sounding of the seventh trumpet.

Remember back in the Old Testament what happened when the seventh trumpet was sounded at the battle of Jericho. When the seventh trumpet sounded, the walls of the city fell down, and the city of Jericho—the city of man—the city that stood opposed to the people of God—was utterly destroyed.

That is exactly what we have here. When the seventh trumpet sounds, the day of judgment has come; the ungodly are destroyed; and Jesus returns to reign.

The intense persecution of 42 months, the death and resurrection of the witnesses, and the great earthquake bring us to the moment of the return of Christ. This is where we were at the end of chapter 6, at the culmination of the sixth seal. Chapters 7-11 have been a replay of the period of time described in chapter 6. And just as chapter 6 ended with the wrath of the Lamb, here in chapter 11 we find ourselves again in view of the glory of the return of Christ.

Look at verse 15: *“Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.’”*

Heavenly voices proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come! The enemies of God’s Kingdom have all been defeated. Verse 18 says that the day of judgment has come. The day that the dead will rise and be judged—that day—has come!

Look at verses 16-18. It’s marvelous.

*“And the twenty-four elders, who sit on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, ‘We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time* came *for the dead to be judged, and* the time *to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth.’”*

Now look at verse 19: *“And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake and a great hailstorm.”*

This vision affirms our expectation of living in presence of God forever. In the coming Kingdom, all of God’s people will have open access to God continuously. This vision of the open sanctuary and the accessible ark pictures the reality of an intimacy with God that we cannot comprehend today.

We all agree that this is what we long for. We long for the return of Christ. We long for the coming of the Kingdom, but somehow this account in Revelation 11 doesn’t feel satisfying. It’s a little bit sketchy, actually. We want to know more.

This judgment referred to in verse 18—what does it look like? What does Jesus look like? What does the coming of the Kingdom look like? I’m wondering about who cleans up the rubble from the earthquakes?

There’s more for us to learn. The remaining eleven chapters in Revelation are going to inform us about these sorts of things, and more. There’s a lot more for us to understand. We would prefer that all the events leading up to the return of Christ be presented chronologically, and sequentially, because that’s the way we think. But that’s not the way events are presented in apocalyptic writing. The Hebrews didn’t feel constrained to tell their accounts chronologically. Their emphasis is on *concepts*, not on timelines.

We’ve pointed out before that what you see in the book of Revelation is not a set of events presented one after another in chronological order. Rather, it’s very much like what you see when you watch a football game on television. You watch a football game, and you see an important play, and then everything stops.

Then you have a replay, and the same play is shown again from the vantage point of a different camera. You see the same play, but from a different perspective. It looks totally different. Then everything stops again, and you’ll have another replay from yet another angle.

Revelation is like that. We see an account of events that occur over a long time frame, and then we have a replay, and we see the same time frame from a different angle.

In our study of Revelation, we’ve seen in chapter 6 the effects of sin and judgment on this world from the time of Christ’s atonement to the time of His return. In chapters 7-11, we’ve seen that same time frame—from the day of Christ’s death until the day of His return—but we’ve seen it from a different angle, and we’ve seen different judgment events during that time.

Beginning next time we meet, we’ll be doing another replay of portions of the same time period, and we’re going to see more of God’s power and providence as God shapes the course of history to bring about His good and perfect conclusion.

We have a lot more to learn from Revelation, but the things we do know are these:

Our world is not the way it’s supposed to be.

One day God will make all things right.

It’s going to get worse before it gets better.

This world will be destroyed.

**Believers may suffer, but their eternal destiny is sure**.

God is bringing His Kingdom and it will be perfect.

Jesus will reign in righteousness.

We’re going to be there for all eternity.

We will enjoy intimacy with God forever

Let’s close in prayer.