

In the first part of Revelation chapter 11, we saw a vision of John measuring the temple. And we heard last week how that is a picture of the care and the concern that God has for his Church. We are safely in his hands, and for that reason there is no reason to fear, no need to fear whatever may come. But Christians, this does not mean that we should just accept defeat in the face of whatever may come. God is not preparing us to lose. God is not saying that he is with us so that we can just get through whatever may come and deal with it. Rather, what he's showing us is that even if we suffer, we will have victory over all things. Because being in God's hands does not mean that we just have hope. It means knowing that victory is ours and that all that made us to suffer because we were Christians in this life will finally be defeated in the end.

So John tells us, beginning in verse 3 of our reading: "And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." So this is all connected to what came before. It's part of the same vision. But now instead of measuring the temple, the picture has shifted to these two witnesses. And John tells us that they were given authority for 1,260 days. Now, that number is the same as the numbers that we heard before. Because in the previous verse, we are told that the courts of the temple will be given over to the nations to trample for forty-two months. That's the period of the time that we suffer here on earth as Christians. Forty-two months is three and a half years, so forty-two and three and a half refer to the same thing. And if you assume that there are thirty days in a month, thirty times forty-two is 1,260. So all three of these numbers point to the same period of time. They're all referring to the same thing. So what we see here, then, is that these witnesses prophesy, they preach and proclaim the Word of God, during that whole time period. They are speaking for God during the time that we suffer here on earth.

But why are there two of them? Because the Bible says that anything that is going to be established as true requires two or three witnesses. Deuteronomy chapter 19, for example, says this: "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established." Now, of course, Deuteronomy here is talking about crimes and witnesses towards crimes and trying to figure out who is guilty and who should be punished. But the idea gets applied to everything. When you have two witnesses saying the same thing, you know that it's true. Because if it was just one person, well, they might be making it up, but two people saying the same thing shows they aren't making it up. It shows that they are speaking the truth. And in this case, there are two of them to show that they are speaking the truth of God's Word.

Now, John goes on to describe these two witnesses as being "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of all the earth." And he describes them in this way because it points back to Zechariah chapter 4. And in that chapter, Zechariah saw a vision of a lampstand with an olive tree on either side of it. And in the book of Zechariah, the lampstand was a picture of the temple that was going to be rebuilt, and the two trees were the witnesses who were proclaiming this truth. Now, here in the book of Revelation, John has used those same images, but now the witnesses are both tree and lampstand. They are both of them together. So what we see here is not a picture of the physical temple, any physical building, but rather the spiritual temple, the true temple, the Church, especially as she proclaims the Word of God to the world. We can also see this because if you remember back in Revelation chapter 1, Christ is described as walking among seven golden lampstands, and those lampstands were pictures of the

individual churches. So the lampstand here or the trees, however we want to describe it, is a picture of the Church. They are the witnesses speaking for God to the world, going out with his Word and with his authority.

And they also show their authority through the miracles that they perform, because all of the things that they're described as doing here point back to either Moses or Elijah. Fire coming from their mouth, for example, is just like Elijah who called down fire from heaven against the enemies of God. In 2 Kings chapter 1, we are told that "Elijah answered the captain of fifty, 'If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.' Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty." In other words, he showed by calling down that fire that he had truly been sent from God. He was truly his prophet. Shutting the skies so that it doesn't rain is also just like Elijah, who prayed and there was a drought for three and a half years. Turning water into blood is just like Moses and the first plague of Egypt, and calling down plagues whenever they want them to happen again is like Moses in Egypt. All of these things show that they have been sent from God. All of them show that they have his authority. And if people receive them rightly, they will recognize that they have come from God. It's like Elijah again who call down fire from heaven to destroy the altar that he had drenched with water, and in 1 Kings chapter 18, the people respond by saying: "The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God!" And so the witnesses here, then, are a picture of the Church, because they are just like the prophets who speak for God. The church has its authority from the Lord, just like the prophets did. And Christians, this is our calling as long as we are still here on the earth, as long as it is not yet come to the end of all things. We are called to speak the Word of God to the world and to go out with his authority.

But that time of speaking will eventually come to an end. John tells us, beginning in verse 7: "And 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." We haven't met this beast yet in the book of Revelation, but we're going to hear a lot more about him in future chapters, especially in chapter 13. So we'll talk more about him when we get to that point. For now, it's enough to say that this beast is a symbol of the world and evil powers which are fighting against the Church. But at the end of time, just before the end when Christ returns, the Church will seem to be defeated. The witnesses will seem to be dead. Jesus describes this time as the love of many growing cold. Paul describes it as a time when some will depart from the faith, or the rebellion as he says in 2 Thessalonians. However you want to describe it, it all points towards the same thing: the Church will seem to be dead. And the bodies of the witnesses will be left out on the streets of the great city. To leave a body unburied like that was the ultimate insult in the ancient world. It was the very worst thing you could do to someone. It showed the utter contempt that the world had for these witnesses.

And they are left lying in the streets of Jerusalem, the great city where the Lord was crucified. Again, this is not talking about actual Jerusalem. This is all symbolic. It is a picture of the world that fights against the Church. This is just like Paul says in Galatians chapter 4: "Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother." So there are two Jerusalems, in other words: the Jerusalem which is above, the heavenly city, and the Jerusalem which is below, the earthly city, a symbol of the world. And that's what we see here: the Jerusalem below which

fights against the Church, and symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, because it is a picture of all of the enemies of God.

And for three and a half days--notice that number again, three and a half--for three and a half days, the world will rejoice over the seeming defeat of the Church. They will exchange presents, we are told, treat it as if it was a holiday, just like the Jews in the time of Esther. Esther chapter 9 says: "...as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor." In other words, the world will be acting as if a great enemy has been defeated, as if their gods have finally struck down the Church. And it will seem as if the Church is dead.

But only as if, Christians, because the Church can never be defeated. The Church will be victorious in the end. John says in verse 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." God gives life back to the witnesses. God takes them up into heaven to be with himself in the sight of all of their enemies. What greater sign of victory could there be? What greater sign could there be than for them to rise from the grave and to ascend into heaven? What greater victory could there be than to show who really belongs to God? What greater victory could there be than to show who truly wins? The Church will be like Jesus also who ascended and who now sits at the right hand of the Father in victory. Her victory will also be complete. And in that day, judgment will fall upon the earth. Some of them will be killed, the rest will be terrified, but all of them will give glory to God. All of them will admit that God is God. All of them will admit that the Church has won. It's just like Jesus says to Philadelphia in Revelation chapter 3: "Behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you." The Church will be victorious, and she will be like Christ also in overcoming the world.

So what does all of this mean for us, then, Christians, especially since we have not yet come to the end of all things? What it means is that we should not act as if things are only ever going to get worse. We should not act as if there is only defeat waiting for us in the end. We should not think that our only hope is to escape these things as if the only way to get away from them is to finally run away and deal with them that way. That's not what's waiting for us. Victory is already ours in Jesus Christ. Even if we suffer with him, we will also be raised with him in victory forever. Yes, the world is evil. Yes, the world seems to be getting worse all the time. Yes, it is not easy to be a Christian. And yes, it will seem as if the Church is defeated just before the end. But only as if, Christians. We will be victorious in Jesus. The church will be vindicated in the end. Victory is not just getting away. We will have a complete victory when the world is utterly defeated, when the world is made to bow before Jesus. So why should we be gloomy? Why should we be depressed and pessimistic about what is to come? The Church will never perish. Our victory in Jesus will be complete, and we will win in the end.

So lift up your heads, Christians! Though we may suffer, we will conquer with Jesus. And our victory will be complete, because Jesus's victory is complete. The world will be judged. The Church will be raised. And the kingdom will be the Lord's forever.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who has ascended far above all the heavens in eternal victory, leading a host of captives in your train, strengthen us today so that we may stand firm in the face of every trouble, knowing that you will give us victory over them all; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.