

REVELATION – SERMON 44

THE TWO WITNESSES – PART ONE

Revelation 11:3-6

INTRODUCTION

- Throughout history, God has raised up witnesses, even in the darkest of times, to be a voice for God, pronouncing his anger at sin, while extending his invitation of mercy, calling sinners to repentance.
- Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Moses, all of Israel's prophets, Christ, the apostles, and throughout the church age, God had his witnesses
- The world rewarded them for their faithful witness unto Christ by torturing them and killing them (Hebrews 11:35-38; Matthew 10:22)
- As we study the eleventh chapter of Revelation, we see that God will still have his witnesses on the earth, even during some of the darkest days that this earth will ever see
- When wickedness overspreads the earth and the Day of the Lord's wrath unfolds, God will raise up witnesses of his truth
- This interlude continues between the sixth and seventh trumpets
- The "two witnesses" are somewhat enigmatic characters; their names are not given; they have no genealogy or background recorded
- On the other hand, there *are* many details given here as to the ministry they are called to and the works they will perform during the 3½ years of their ministry

I. THEIR PORTRAYAL AS FAMILIAR PROPHETS

- A. There has been much speculation as to the identity of the two witnesses

1. Some interpret them as being symbols – the law and prophets; the Old and New Testaments; The two tables of the law; Christ and the Holy Spirit
2. Some see them as being representative of groups – Israel and the Church; the Waldenses and Albigenses; the Eastern and Western churches; the Jewish remnant; the church
3. Literalists interpret them as two individuals, with three main options – Enoch and Elijah; Moses and Elijah; two unknown future prophets

B. Are they returned prophets who lived previously?

1. Enoch
 - a. He, along with Elijah, was translated to heaven without dying
 - b. Yet Hebrews 11:5 states that he was translated “that he should not see death”, which would seem to preclude him returning to earth and dying (Hebrews 11:5)
 - c. Hebrews 9:27 is a general principle, not an absolute rule – there are many who will never die (1 Corinthians 15:51); and numerous people have died more than once
2. Moses
 - a. Moses is a fitting counterpart to Elijah, as he represents the law, while the other represents the prophets
 - b. They both appeared at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:3)
 - c. The plagues of the witnesses including turning water to blood (11:6) are reminiscent of Moses (Exodus 7:19-20)

- d. The unusual circumstances around Moses' death may indicate his body being preserved for a future return (Deuteronomy 34:5-6)
- e. However, Moses has already died, and at the transfiguration "appeared in glory" with Elijah (Luke 9:30-31); which is problematic if they are intended to die in the future, seeing glorified bodies are not subject to death

3. Elijah

- a. God promised through Malachi that he would "send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Malachi 4:5-6)
 - b. There is some question as to whether John the Baptist was a fulfilment or partial fulfilment of this prophecy
 - c. John said he was not Elijah (John 1:21); yet elsewhere Jesus state that John was Elijah (Matthew 11:13-14; 17:12-13; Mark 9:13)
 - d. The angel Gabriel said that John the Baptist was "in the spirit and power of Elias" (Luke 1:17)
 - e. John therefore could fulfil the prophecy of Malachi, not by being the person of Elijah, but by ministering in the same manner as him
 - f. It is not necessary, therefore, for Elijah to return *personally* as one of the two witnesses during the tribulation, but *virtually*, that is, in his spirit and power, to meet the prophetic requirements
4. It may be best not to see the witnesses as being the actual returned prophets of old, but as being two unknown future prophets, whose ministry will pattern that of Old Testament prophets like Moses and Elijah

C. Witnesses

1. This is the Greek word *martysin* and is found in another form (*martyrian*) in v.7 translated “testimony”
2. As many Christians sealed their testimony with their blood, the word “witness” came to be synonymous with dying

D. The duration of their ministry

1. 1260 days
2. It is not clear whether this refers to the first half of the seven years, or the second
3. However, it seems to be less problematic to place their ministry at the *first* half of the tribulation
4. In this case, they will fulfil a similar capacity as Haggai and Zechariah in encouraging the rebuilding of the temple at the beginning of the tribulation
5. They will be protected until the mid-point when the beast overcomes them and desecrates the temple

E. Clothed in sackcloth

1. This was a coarse cloth, made of black goat’s hair
2. It became an outward sign of mourning, grief or repentance (Jeremiah 4:8; 6:26; Jonah 3:5-8; Amos 8:10)
3. A prophet in sackcloth indicated his own grief over the sins of the people; his anguish over judgments he must pronounce; and the need for deep contrition and repentance (Isaiah 20:2)
4. Just as John felt bitterness in his belly over the prophecies he received (10:10), so these witnesses displayed the bitter judgment that was coming upon the inhabitants of the earth (Jeremiah 2:19)

F. Olive trees and candlesticks

1. This is a clear allusion to Zechariah 4 and the Lord's description of Zerubbabel and Joshua
2. In that case, there was one lampstand representing the temple and the nation; while the two olive trees represented the Lord's anointed ones, Zerubbabel and Joshua
3. The vision showed them that it was through the power of the Holy Spirit that they would accomplish the difficult work of restoration after the exile (Zechariah 4:6)
4. In the same way, the two witnesses of Revelation 11 will be endowed with special power from the Holy Spirit to do the work they are called to
5. They will be as candlesticks
 - a. "Before God" – holy, consecrated instruments of service
 - b. Sending forth the light of God's truth into a dark and sinful world

II. THEIR PREACHING OF FORGIVENESS AND PERDITION

A. They will "prophesy"

1. The primary role of the prophet is no *foretelling*, but *forth-telling*
2. They will deliver God's message, as he calls them "my witnesses"
3. They will proclaim the coming of Christ's kingdom on earth
4. They will reprove mankind for their sin against God and call them to repentance
5. They will preach faith in the blood of Christ (cf. Revelation 7:14)

6. They will reprove Israel for the rejection of Messiah, and call them to faith in him (cf. Zechariah 12:10)

B. The world's response

1. While there appears to be a form of repentance after their ascension to heaven (11:13), this seems to be as much from the earthquake as from their preaching
2. The world generally remains in a state of defiant impenitence (Revelation 9:21; 16:11)
3. They will preach an unpopular message that will incite the hatred of the world
 - a. They will attempt to harm them (v.5)
 - b. The world will rejoice at their deaths (v.10)

III. THEIR POWER WITH FIRE AND PLAGUES

A. A time of miracles

1. The tribulation will be a time of miracles, performed by both the godly and ungodly (2 Thessalonians 2:9)
2. This will be the fifth period in history of the world when God will enable a few people to do unusually spectacular signs and wonders
 - a. The days of Moses and Joshua
 - b. The days of Elijah and Elisha
 - c. The days of Daniel
 - d. The days of Christ's earthly ministry and the days of the apostles

e. The tribulation period

B. The manner of the miracles

1. The miracles of the witnesses are similar to those performed through Moses and Elijah
2. Power to kill with fire
 - a. The Christian in this present age is commanded not to exact vengeance on his persecutors (Matthew 5:38-39,44; Luke 9:54-56; Romans 12:19)
 - b. These witnesses, however, are permitted to destroy their persecutors
 - c. In this case, these men are not only preachers of God's judgment, but executors of it
 - d. The fire proceeding from the mouth may actually come from their mouths, or may indicate a calling down of fire from heaven in the same way Elijah did (2 Kings 1:10-14)
3. Power to shut the heavens
 - a. Elijah prayed and God shut the heavens for 3½ years (1 Kings 17:1; Luke 4:25; James 5:17)
 - b. Note that drought has been a form of God's judgment on sinful nations throughout history
4. Power to send plagues
 - a. This harkens back to the ten plagues God sent upon the Egyptians (Exodus 7:17-21)
 - b. Note that in this case, they have the ability to send plagues "as often as they will", rather than only at God's specific command

C. The purpose of the miracles

1. To show the Almighty power of God over creation and all the gods of the heathen (Numbers 33:4)
2. To punish sinners for their rebellion
3. To provoke fear and repentance (Acts 2:43)

CONCLUSION

1. The sending of these two witnesses is a demonstration of God's mercy to still give light to mankind who loves darkness
2. It is an encouragement to us, who live in dark times, that God is still raising up witnesses
3. It is a reminder that God's method for convincing and converting sinners has not changed (1 Corinthians 1:21; Romans 10:17)
4. These witnesses are a solemn reminder that this world hates the light and will seek to silence, hurt and kill those who proclaim it
5. The world needs Christian men and women who will stand up and be witnesses for the truth and warn sinners of "righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come" (Acts 24:25)