

## Revelation 11:4-7 – The Two Witnesses Are Attacked

What is this sermon about? It's about Revelation 11. It's my job to help you understand it so that what God has to say in these verses will affect you. I'm not allowed to deviate from what God has said here.

Whether you've read this passage a hundred times or are brand new to this, I want to reassure you, even the most seasoned Bible scholars hesitate at Revelation 11. Albert Barnes, who wrote a 14 volume commentary on the whole Bible, said that this is one of the most difficult parts of the book of Revelation.<sup>1</sup> This morning, if God is so gracious, I'll show you plainly what these bewildering images mean (building on the work we did last week!). Don't we believe that every single part of the Bible is God's Word and is not just important, but beneficial for us to understand? So if you will work hard to follow along in your Bible, let me explain the prophecy of the Two Witnesses. First, we saw last week that the symbolic scene takes place in a city—the symbol is the City of Jerusalem and the Temple which had all been destroyed about 25 years earlier. But I showed you how the writers of the New Testament consistently taught that all who believe in Jesus, the Church of Christ, we are the New Temple and God's Spirit lives in us. So in verse 1, the Temple itself is the true and believing Church saved through faith in Jesus. The outer court and the rest of the City represent all the people who “go to church” and think that makes them Christians—the Church we can see (although we can't see each other's hearts to see if he or she is a *genuine* follower of Christ). Sometimes these people—church-goers—are there to explore Christianity; many, though, are hypocrites who think their religion makes them more righteous than other sinners. Verse 2 predicted that those pretend Christians will overrun all of Christianity for 1,260 years (I showed last week why every day in Bible prophecies is symbolic of an actual year). But Jesus, the One speaking to John in verses 1-3, said He was going to give authority to His Two Witnesses to prophesy—to preach the truth—the whole time Christianity was overrun, trampled by hypocrites in the Church.

Then I showed from the Old Testament and then from Jesus' own definition in Rev 1:20, that since “lampstands” are a symbol for churches, and verse 4 says that these Two Witnesses are also “lampstands”, that means these are not two individual prophets, but a prediction of churches, “local gatherings of genuine followers of Christ.” The phrase “two witnesses” is a legal term from the Old Testament. If someone was being accused of, say, murder, God said he must not be convicted on the testimony of only one witness, but only if there are two or three witnesses. So “two witnesses” are the bare minimum for a legal conviction. What verses 3-4 are predicting is that for over 1200 years, a bare minimum of faithful Christian congregations would keep on teaching and preaching the Gospel, and their testimony would be evidence against the false, hypocritical Church which fell away from Jesus. That brings us to verse 5. The “Two Witnesses” (which represent...?) are part of a legal drama in these verses: like Law and Order (or Matlock for you older people). In these verses I'll show you The Witnesses Testifying and then The Defendant Attacking Them (we'll only get as far as verse 7 this week). Now if you were watching a courtroom drama on TV, and suddenly the defendant jumped from his chair and attacked and killed a key witness, you would be shocked! Even though it's only actors on TV. But this is real life predicted ahead of time—we are watching a prediction of faithful congregations being attacked by the very criminals who had already hijacked the Church of Jesus Christ. And the reason the defendant hated the witnesses so much was that they had the temerity to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—in other words, to teach and preach what God actually said in the Bible.

### The Witnesses Testify [read verses 5-6]

Look at what the witnesses *do* in verse 3, and 7: they “will prophesy” Jesus said, and they will “testify”. But remember these are *congregations of people who believe in Jesus*: churches. And that’s what real churches are supposed to always do: to prophesy—to proclaim God’s Word, what the Bible says; to testify—to stand up and confess our confidence not in ourselves but in Jesus Christ. This is what all genuine Christians do. Hypocrites act like they really trust Jesus while they’re at church on Sunday morning; real believers depend on Jesus and serve Him every day. Which means we also are called to testify, to share message about who Jesus is, what He said, why He died and rose again, and what it means. Verse 3 and verse 7 say that these witnesses do this: they prophesy and testify. And in this passage, that’s all they do! I know, you’re thinking, but what about the fire coming out of their mouths in verse 5, and stopping the rain, and striking with plagues in verse 6? But look at the actual words: it doesn’t say they do those things, it gives a condition: “if” their enemies do something “then” this is how they will be destroyed [read v5]. There are some other things you need to notice here if you want to understand this. First, verse 5 says “if anyone *wants* to harm them”. People who have a desire to harm, people who want to hurt the witnesses, will die. The end of the verse repeats it to make the point clear: “if anyone wants to harm them it is necessary he be killed in this way” (ESV says, “is doomed to be killed”). Why does it say this is “necessary”? Because these witnesses are *not* acting on their own authority. They are representatives. They are heralds sent by their King. Whose witnesses are they? In verse 3 Jesus says these are “my two witnesses”. In verse 4 it says they “stand before the Lord of the earth”—meaning they serve the Lord who rules all things. So if someone *wants to hurt* God’s heralds, God’s representative spokesmen, *of course it is necessary to die*. You can’t get away with hating the One who creates and sustains all living things. It’s suicide. Another thing to notice is where this fire-breathing imagery comes from.

Almost every Bible scholar agrees that this miraculous and fiery punishment from the mouths of the witnesses that consumes those who hate them is alluding to the time, recorded in 2 Kings 1, when the prophet Elijah called down fire from heaven that consumed the soldiers coming to arrest him. But what many don’t realize is what the *difference* between the witnesses’ testimony and Elijah’s miracle *means*.<sup>ii</sup> The witnesses don’t depend on super-powers. They stand their ground by speaking God’s Word. Unlike what happened for Elijah, fire doesn’t fall from the sky: it comes from their mouths—a symbolic way of showing that those who hate them are being judged by God’s Word—the very Word they preach. God said exactly that to the Prophet Jeremiah: “Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts: ‘Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them.’” (Jer 5:14) No fire came from Jeremiah’s mouth; when the judgement he predicted finally came, it wasn’t literal fire. And no fire would come from the mouths of the Two Witnesses, from these churches. But God really spoke through Jeremiah’s mouth, and God really would speak through the mouths of the Two Witnesses. And God’s Word would judge: some would accept the testimony of these churches; most would hate them for it. How their listeners responded to the message sealed their eternal fates: the rain of blessing (c.f. v6) or the fire of judgement and spiritual drought. Remember, in verse 3 Jesus said that these are His witnesses—they are testifying His Word. Like Elijah did, and Moses before him. That’s why verse 6 includes the plagues God struck Egypt with—like God spoke through Moses, judging the tyrant who kept them in slavery. The churches symbolized by the Two Witnesses spoke the Word of God like Elijah; like Moses, they proclaimed Good News that sets captives free. Freedom from sin; from death; from religion. Jesus still rescues sinners who hear His Good News and trust Him.

Before I explain how and when the things predicted here actually happened, let me point out an obvious implication from all this. If you are not yet a committed follower of Jesus—you're here to check it out—your situation is very precarious. How you respond to God's Word is life and death: so you need to find a church where they will have the courage to testify what God says in His Word, especially if those are the things you don't *want* to hear. All kinds of spiritual gurus and inclusive pastors will tell you exactly what you already *want* to hear, but that's a guarantee they aren't telling you what God has really said: they aren't witnesses. God is not a people-pleaser: He judges sin, sent His Son, satisfied justice, saves sinners. God is holy. You aren't. Trust Jesus. That's our testimony.

### The Defendant Attacks the Witnesses [read verse 7]

Let me tell you when and how this happened. First, verse 7 says, "when they... finished their testimony" but the word doesn't mean when they stopped talking and sat down; it means when they had given a complete testimony—when all the evidence was presented. Second, Jesus said they would "prophesy" for 1260 years. We aren't told when they began or exactly when they stop prophesying, but 1260 years is a long enough period of time that we should expect these truth-telling churches to have kept at it for a long, long time.

Revelation 9, the sixth trumpet, brought us up to the middle of the 1400's. But the witnesses' testimony goes back way before the 1400's. In fact, one clue is that Bible-teaching churches are here described as small in number: just "two witnesses" and not three or more. And the facts of history are that not long after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, since pastors were frequently hired as political favours and not because they were able to teach the Bible, churches became worldly, secular institutions (the outer court and the city, v2) instead of places where real believers gathered to worship Jesus and remember how He saves sinners (the inner temple, v1). The "outer court" Church became corrupt, apostate, and its leaders began "to make war" against the witnesses (v7).

In the Greek-speaking east, by the 800's a sect of Christian churches called "Paulicians" were hunted by the authorities because of their testimony.<sup>iii</sup> The authorities murdered 100,000 of them to try and shut them up.<sup>iv</sup> By the 1200's, in western Europe, groups like the Waldenses, the Beguines, and some early Franciscans, more or less shared, according to *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, a "devotion to the gospel, the condemnation of violence and power, and opposition to the Roman [Catholic] hierarchy..."<sup>v</sup> In fact, in every century since the visible, "Catholic Church" acquired secular power, there was a small, protesting, Gospel preaching, remnant of Christian congregations speaking the truth. And during that time, their testimony increasingly pointed out alarming problems with the teachings, and then the evil abuses of power, by the leaders of the church who sat on thrones in the city of Rome.

I think this is what that means, when their testimony is "complete" (in verse 7): When their testimony about what the Bible teaches finally presented enough evidence from the Bible that the Popes of the Roman Catholic Church are indeed the Antichrist—the enemy within the Church. Numerous witnesses became concerned by what they saw happening in Rome as soon as the Emperor made the popes the official authority over the whole Christian religion (the decree of Phocas in 606).<sup>vi</sup> The war didn't happen right away—it evolved over time. By the 1200's the Popes were ordering the deaths of witnesses all over Europe. But look at that phrase in verse 7: "the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war against them". That wording comes from Daniel 7:21, where a new ruler rises in Rome, right after the

Roman Empire falls, and makes war against the saints. Daniel 7:25 says he will have authority over the saints for 1260 years (on the year-for-a-day rule). The testimonial evidence gives a compelling picture.

- In the early church, Irenaeus<sup>vii</sup> and Tertullian<sup>viii</sup> had shown from the Bible that this Antichrist would rise up once the Roman Empire was “divided among ten kings”;<sup>ix</sup> (fulfilled by 600AD)
- Chrysostom, the pastor of the *Hagia Sophia* in Constantinople, said “when the Roman Empire is out of the way, then he [Antichrist] will come.”<sup>x</sup>
- In *A Christian’s Pocket Guide to the Papacy* (2015), the writer says, “The Protestant Reformation was not the first movement that referred to the Pope as the Antichrist. A robust Medieval European tradition—from the Waldensians to Wycliffe, and down to the Hussites—had denounced the Pope in such a radical way...”<sup>xi</sup>  
And he quotes the website of the The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (which I looked up), where they admit that the claim the Popes are the Antichrist goes back to the eleventh century.<sup>xii</sup>

So the Beast attacked the Witnesses. In The Council of Tours (1163), the Third Lateran Council (1179); in decrees by popes in 1183 and 1198, objecting Christians became outcasts, and outcasts outlaws, and outlaws hunted--the Inquisition began. In the 1200's at least six Catholic Councils aimed the guns of the Church against these stubborn Christians and made it illegal for non-clergy to have Bibles.<sup>xiii</sup> In England the followers of Wycliffe were outlawed for their witness; in Bohemia, the followers of Huss. The death-toll climbed into the millions. The symbol of “killing” the Two Witnesses describes the silencing of the witness of true Christian churches that had lasted over a thousand years. Their crime? Teaching and preaching the Word of God. Then came the day when they were “dead”:

"On May 5, 1514, at the Ninth Session of the Fifth Lateran Council, the following announcement was proclaimed to Pope Leo X. "There is an end of resistance to the Papal rule and religion. Opposers there exist no more." ..."The whole body of Christendom is now seen to be subjected to its Head, i.e, to Thee."<sup>xiv</sup>

And for a time, it looked like the Antichrist had won. But verse 7 is not the end of this prophecy. And 1514 is not the end of history. Remember, whose “Two Witnesses” are these? Who do we serve? Jesus has the last Word.

<sup>i</sup> Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes*, “Revelation 11:1” (Online Bible Edition).

<sup>ii</sup> I’m indebted to Matthew Poole for this insight (*Matthew Poole’s Commentary*, “Revelation 11:5”. Online Bible Edition.)

<sup>iii</sup> See for example, J.A. Wylie’s *History of Protestantism 1878* (repr. Kilkeel, N. Ireland: Monroe Missionary Trust, 1990), 1.32-33. 3 Vols. Bound in 2.); cited in *The Final Prophecy of Jesus*, Oral Collins (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007). P. 252.

<sup>iv</sup> Official Catholic historians usually call them heretics, but more unbiased research has shown most of their beliefs were true to the Bible (see Wylie’s quote above).

<sup>v</sup> *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, Ed. “Albigenses” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), p.26.

<sup>vi</sup> See Collins, p.251, citing: “Elliott, 3.302-304; Wm. Jones, *History of the Christian Church* (Conrad, Mont.: Triangle, 1993), 2.380-387; Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1910; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 4:221-225; John L. Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History* (London: William Tegg, 1859), 245-246, and primary sources referenced therein.” Also see Chirico, pp27-43.

<sup>vii</sup> Bruce, F. F.. 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Volume 45 (Word Biblical Commentary) (p. 217). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

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<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Also see Collins, p. 251.

<sup>x</sup> Bruce, Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Leonardo De Chirico, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to the Papacy* (Scotland, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2015), p.48.

<sup>xii</sup> [<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/ecumenical/lutheran/attitudes-papal-primacy.cfm>] Accessed February 8, 2019.

<sup>xiii</sup> Collins, p. 258

<sup>xiv</sup> E.B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticæ*, 4 Vols. (London: Seeley, Jackson, and Halliday. 1862. Reprint, Still Waters Revival Books, 1999). 2.450. Cited in Collins, p259.