

The Conquering Christ

Message 6

Two Witnesses

Revelation 10:1-11:19

Seals and Trumpets

Last week we left off with the sixth trumpet. In chapter 9 verse 13 this trumpet announces an invasion by an unbelievably massive army – all mounted on horses. They are equipped with terrible armor, and even the horses are terrifying. They breathe out fire and wound with their tails, and devastate mankind. This week we continue the vision of the sixth trumpet. Before we plunge into chapter 10, let us get our bearings.

Remember that Revelation is built around three series of seven visions. The seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls provide the primary structure of the book. The other visions contribute additional detail to this essential outline. The seals are an expanded table of contents. They summarize what is in the scroll the Lamb received from the throne. The trumpets proclaim the judgments to come, warning people to repent of their sins and worship the Lamb. The bowls show the events of the end, when God finally executes His judgment.

Now a quick review. What are the three interpretive principles that govern our reading of Revelation? First, it is a picture book. The pictures will not necessarily tell a chronological story, or develop a sustained argument. Second, the pictures obtain their meaning from scripture itself. So we go back to the Bible to discover the meaning of the symbols, for example the beast. Third, Revelation presents a heavenly perspective about events on earth. It is not about political or military developments, but about the spiritual developments behind political and military events.

So the seals show seven pictures about the period leading up to the end. These are roughly chronological, but not rigorously. There is some overlap. The trumpets present seven pictures warning people to repent of their wickedness and turn to Christ. These are different aspects to the ministry of the apostles and prophets between Pentecost and the fall of Jerusalem. They are not especially chronological. The bowls show the events as disaster overtakes Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Last week we identified the biblical meaning of several symbols. The first four trumpets proclaimed judgment on the land, sea, fresh water, and heavens. We saw that the Bible consistently uses these as symbols for the Jews, the gentiles, the temple, and rulers. The fifth trumpet brought forth a swarm of locusts from the abyss. We saw that the Bible treats these locusts as demons and the abyss as their house. We also saw Satan as Wormwood who pollutes the temple, and as Abaddon and Apollyon, the destroyer who leads the demon army. And the sixth trumpet introduced a great army, which represents armed conflict. All six of these pictures show the message that the apostles and prophets proclaimed throughout the period between Pentecost and the fall of Jerusalem. They warned of disaster for Jew and gentile, temple and palace. They warned of demonic attack and armed conflict. The purpose of these judgments and the purpose of the warnings was to turn people away from the corrupt temple worship, idolatry, and wickedness to Jesus. If you think these disasters are bad, you have not seen anything yet! A complete catastrophe is coming, and your only hope is to find refuge in Jesus.

The Mighty Angel

Before we hear the last trumpet, we have an interlude of two other visions. Chapter 10 presents us with a mighty angel. By now you should be able to identify him. He is clothed in a cloud, his head is surrounded by a halo, his face shines like the sun, his legs shine with metallic brilliance. He has a scroll in his hand. Do you recognize Jesus? Go back to chapter one and compare this description with that one. He

stands on the land and sea, showing mastery of Jew and gentile worlds. The little scroll is part of the scroll He received in chapter five. It is the message that the witnesses of Jesus will proclaim on the earth. John must eat the scroll, that is completely absorb and identify with this message. It is sweet to the taste, but bitter in the stomach. This is always the case with the gospel. It is the good news of salvation for all mankind. But for those who refuse to believe, it is the message of destruction. Remember what Jesus said.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. (Matthew 10:34-36)

The Two Witnesses

Chapter 11 introduces another, more complex vision. John is given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple. Now I do not know about you, but this seems bizarre to me. But as with all the symbols in Revelation, that is simply because my familiarity with the rest of the Bible is so limited. If you read Ezekiel 40-47 and Zechariah 2 you will find the prophets measuring the temple and Jerusalem. This symbolized establishing the boundary of God's people. Here in Revelation John is told to measure the temple, the altar, and the people worshiping there. He is not to measure the court outside the temple. Now the temple was a very large complex, with several courts. We can get a better picture of this by considering the Greek word translated "temple" in verses one and two. It is the word *ναος*. There is another word for temple, *ιερον*. As is usually true in such cases, there is some overlap in the use of these two words. But for the most part *ιερον* is used for the temple in general, and *ναος* is used for the inner court, the holy place. It might be better to translate this word "sanctuary". Then verse two would read, "do not measure the court outside the sanctuary." So we have a picture of the temple complex, with the inner sanctuary "measured", and the outer area left unmeasured. The inner area, the sanctuary, is the holy place. This is where the altar is, and the true worshipers. The altar is where sacrifices were offered for sin. The outer court has worshipers, but they are not holy, and there is no atonement for sin there. This area will be trampled by the nations.

This passage is an interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets. It parallels a similar interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. If you look back to chapter seven you will find the sealing of 144,000 Israelites and the vast multitude of gentiles worshiping before the heavenly throne. Before the final calamity God will designate His own people with a mark on their foreheads. This does not mean that they will escape suffering. Revelation 7:14 says, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation." It means that they will survive suffering with their faith intact. The measuring of the sanctuary is another way of showing symbolically that God marked His own people. There will be suffering and great calamity. God's people will suffer, too. But they will survive with their faith intact. Meanwhile those who are not brought near to God by the blood of Jesus will be trampled in the ensuing turmoil.

The bulk of chapter 11 discusses the two witnesses. Let us look closely at how they are described. First, they have authority and prophesy clothed in sackcloth. This is a clear description of Old Testament prophets. They are two olive trees and two lampstands that stand before the Lord. This is a symbol borrowed from Zechariah chapter four, where they represent the Lord's anointed ones. Trees are common symbols for men, and olive trees represent Israelites. Lampstands produce light, of course, as Israel was to be a light to the nations. In Zechariah's vision the lampstands are fed by a continuous stream of oil. Oil is a symbol for the Holy Spirit. So this is a picture of a Spirit-empowered light. Next we see that these two witnesses can kill people by fire from their mouths. It should seem obvious that this refers to the effect of their message. There are numerous Old Testament instances where God consumed His enemies by fire. In Numbers 16 this was directly connected to the words of Moses. Elijah killed the messengers of the wicked Israelite king by commanding fire to come down from heaven and consume them. (2 Kings 1) In Jeremiah 5:14 God said to Jeremiah, "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.”

Verse six describes the witnesses in terms unmistakably reminiscent of Elijah and Moses. Their ministry spans 42 months, or 1260 days, which is three and a half years. Elijah prayed for a drought, and no rain fell for three and a half years. Moses turned the water of Egypt to blood, and brought many plagues on that land. Moses and Elijah were the two most prominent figures of the Old Covenant. Moses gave the law, and Elijah was the first of the prophets. The Jews often referred to their scriptures as “the law and the prophets”. So Moses and Elijah represent the totality of God’s word. They also performed the most powerful miracles in the Old Covenant. When Jesus went up on the mountain to meet God, Moses and Elijah joined him, indicating their role as representatives of God’s people. Finally a beast arises from the abyss and kills them. We already know that the abyss is where the demons live, and the Old Testament is full of beasts which war against God’s people.

Now we are told how people will respond to the death of the two witnesses. But first we get a vital piece of information. In simple language we learn that the city where Jesus died is symbolized by Sodom and Egypt. That city, of course, is Jerusalem. Last week we noticed the pervasive Exodus imagery. We also noticed that Satan, under the name of Wormwood, had polluted the temple. John is telling us that Jerusalem has become the new Egypt, and God is going to torment her until His new, true Israel escapes from her murderous grip.

Verse nine says, “some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb.” This phrase “peoples and tribes and languages and nations”, or some variant of this four-part term, is used repeatedly in Revelation for the gentiles – all non-Jewish people. Apparently the gentiles are stunned that such powerful figures could be killed. The Jews have a very different reaction. Verse 10 says, “those who dwell in the land will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell in the land.” We already established that the land is Judea, and the dwellers in the land are the Jews. They throw a party and give each other presents when the witnesses are killed. They rejoiced when Stephen was stoned (see Acts 7), and they are still at it. In the book of Esther the Jews sent presents to each other when God defeated their enemies. This is now used as a symbol for deliverance from a deadly enemy. The two witnesses had been prophesying destruction on those who refuse to worship the Lamb. The Jews who rejected Jesus were tormented by this message. The death of the witnesses was a great relief to them. They perceived that a terrible enemy had been defeated. Then just when they were relieved to be rid of their torment, the witnesses came back to life!

OK, so who are these two witnesses? Let us remember our interpretive principles. These are pictures of reality – symbols. There is no reason to think they must be two real people. We need to look to scripture for advice on how to understand these symbols. And keep in mind that this is a heavenly perspective – an account of spiritual developments.

What would be represented by a symbol of an olive tree? Who is the light of the world? Who is empowered by the Holy Spirit? Who has a prophetic message? Who speaks with the power of Moses and Elijah? Who was made a witness to Jesus? There is only one possibility – the church! Romans 11 speaks of the church as the wild olive branch that was grafted into the cultivated olive tree. Jesus said in Matthew 5:14 that the church is the light of the world. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit into the church at Pentecost, and He told the apostles that when the Spirit came they would do greater works than He did. Jesus commissioned the church with the gospel message, and sent her out into the world as His witness. Just as Moses and Elijah represented the Old Covenant people and ministry in the minds of the Jews, so these two witnesses represent the New Covenant witness of the church. Ultimately the witness of these two figures will lead to the execution of their murderers. In keeping with God’s law it is necessary that there be two witnesses for a

capital crime to be prosecuted. Symbolically that is what we have.

What of the 42 months, the 1260 days, which equal one plus two plus a half years? Although the trumpets show pictures of the gospel witness throughout the mid first century period, I think this passage focuses on the last three and a half years before the fall of Jerusalem. During that time the beast raged against the church in full fury. At first he had no success, but finally he killed the church. Or so it seemed. But God miraculously resurrected the church and gave it a place in heaven formerly reserved for the angels. We shall see more about this in the coming weeks.

21st Century Witness

If all this is about first century events, what good is it for us now? This passage is a powerful message for us now because *we* are that church which overcame the beast and now occupies a heavenly position. The church did not change into something different after Jerusalem fell. Although some people seem to act as though *they* invented the church, it has been around for 2,000 years, and it is the same church. As much as the first century church, we are the witness of Christ. We are the light of the world. Nations that have little Christian presence are dark places. Islamic, Buddhist, and animist cultures are beautiful in many ways, but God sees them as plagued by darkness. Only the church can enlighten them. The church is empowered by the Spirit to spread the gospel. We slay men and women, nations and kings with our fiery message. In biblical terminology slaying can either be conversion or death. We possess the power of Moses and Elijah to destroy nations and kingdoms opposed to Jesus by converting them with the gospel.

You may be thinking, “You’ve got to be kidding! I’ve never seen a church with that kind of power.” Yes you have. If your church is a true church that believes the Bible and trusts in Jesus, your church has this power. In fact, if you are a true believer, you also have this power. Paul said to the Romans, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16) Paul says the word of the gospel, the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, is a power which breaks through sin and hearts hardened in hatred toward God. The gospel attacks angry sinners and destroys them. It turns them into lovers of God. Paul should know. He was the worst enemy of the church. But when He met Jesus, He turned from His sin and embraced the gospel.

Do you know what the real problem of the church is? It is not the lack of power. It is the refusal to believe God. God says, we have the power to convert the nations. So what do we do? We play with Facebook and video games and worship Jesus for one hour on Sunday and come to RUF on Tuesday night and study sometimes and try to get a good job when we graduate. These things are good in themselves, but there is much more to the Christian life. If we find ourselves in a conversation about Jesus with an unbeliever, we try to share the gospel. And if he does not believe, we think it is because the message was not persuasive enough. We send soldiers to Iraq, but we refuse to send missionaries there. God says we have the power to convert the nations, and we do not believe Him. We believe we are weak, so we refuse to do anything that requires strength. In a fundamental way the church believes God is deceiving us.

Do you know what your problem is? You do not know what is real. That is because you are trapped in an earthly perspective. Reality can only be seen clearly from the throne of God. Revelation is the accurate vision of reality that corrects your pitiful eyesight. Do you want to know what is real? I will tell you what is real. When you tell your lab partner that Jesus died for your sins, you breathe fire into his soul. He may look unfazed on the surface, but you have opened up gaping holes in his demonic armor. When you write for the Patriot and explain that Jesus is the answer to the problems of education or poverty, you explode a spiritual bomb within Lehigh University. When you feed the poor in the name of Jesus, you terrorize the forces of evil. And when the gospel is preached in Iraq, peace will follow. In all these cases you will seldom see any observable change right away. That is why most Christians give up the fight. The witness of the church is a spiritual battle. It cannot be seen with the eyes of flesh. But over time the gospel changes the

earth. Meanwhile we must persevere because God tells us we are defeating our enemies.

Just as the church essentially died in the first century holocaust, so the church in the ensuing centuries has almost died. Gnosticism almost destroyed the church from within in the third century. The Romans tried to exterminate the church until the fourth century. Islam tried to wipe out the church in the seventh century. In the 20th century communism tried to eradicate the church in Russia and China. Now the Sudanese government has been raping, enslaving, and killing Christians for 20 years. But all these efforts fail. Why? How can we explain the survival of the church? We cannot. There is no explanation. The survival of the church is a miracle. God intervenes in human affairs and supernaturally revives the church when evil men have essentially killed it. This will always be the case until Christ returns.

Do you believe Jesus, or is He pulling your leg? Are appearances more reliable than the word of God? Does your witness really have this explosive impact, or are you genuinely powerless? Everyone knows the answer. It is written in your daily actions.

The Last Trumpet

The last trumpet is also the third woe. It is the message of the enthronement of Jesus. At this news all heaven breaks loose in loud celebration. Let us look again at what they are celebrating.

We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was,
for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.
The nations raged, but your wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,
and those who fear your name, both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.

Revelation 11:17-18

This is not the last message chronologically, for Jesus was enthroned when He ascended to the Father 40 days after His resurrection. This is the *ultimate* message, the pinnacle of the gospel. Jesus is not only the bleeding Lamb, He is also the roaring Lion. He rules the nations. He rewards His followers, however insignificant or important they appear to be on earth. He lets loose His anger against His enemies, and He destroys the destroyers of the earth – Satan and all his followers. This is indeed good news! After all the suffering we must endure, we win! Jesus wins! Jesus is wonderful! And you can share his victory! The ark of the covenant, the sign of God's presence, is now visible for the first time in history. God is no longer hidden behind a curtain, but we can talk to Him face to face. Anyone who believes the gospel cannot help but rejoice.

But the trumpet of celebration is also the trumpet of woe. For those who do not believe the gospel it is their death sentence. Jesus poured out His life in terrible agony to save them. To refuse Jesus' offer of salvation is the most despicable, traitorous, evil thing in the universe. Death is too good for such people. Woe to those who reject Jesus when the last trumpet sounds!

Conclusion

Revelation opened with the statement that Jesus is the faithful witness. Are you skeptical that you can be a powerful witness for Jesus? Take comfort. It is not your job to be a witness. Jesus knows that it is a calling you are not capable of. Jesus is the true and faithful witness, and He will speak and act through you. Only do not rebel against Him. When Jesus calls you to speak, do so. When He calls you to serve, obey. Ask your roommate if he knows why Jesus died. Go to lunch with your classmates and ask them if they think Jesus rose from the dead. Sign up to feed the children on Wednesday. It may appear that you

sputter and mix up the message. Your service may appear confused and shabby. But the promise of the gospel is not that Jesus uses eloquent, skilled servants. The power is not in you. It is in the gospel, and Jesus is the witness. He speaks as you speak. He serves as you serve. This is true. Do not call Jesus a liar. Believe in Jesus by acting like you expect Him to use you powerfully.

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