

Revelation 11:1-19
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool
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The weapons God has given us look incredibly weak, in the world's eyes don't they? I wonder if you are ever discouraged by that – by the apparent weakness of what God has given us. The church looks pathetic in the world's eyes and incredibly weak. I wonder if we ever lose heart because of that.

John's readers were similarly tempted. He's writing, you'll remember, to Christians who are battered and bruised in an institutionally pagan empire. We're in the First Century. The Romans rule the world with an iron fist. Part of that rule at this point in time almost certainly involved enforced worship of the Emperor. And if you've seen the film *Gladiator* you'll have some idea of what could happen to you if you did not do the will of the Emperor. It's a time of high stress and suffering and danger for Christians. John himself, we learn in chapter 1, is imprisoned or exiled on the Island of Patmos, because of his Christian beliefs. So one of the reasons he writes is to encourage and strengthen Christians who are in this dangerous and frightening situation. One of the ways John does this of course is to point them to the end, to the future, the goal of history, and say 'look this is the outcome towards which history is inexorably moving: it is good news, not bad news: you Christians are caught up and included in it, and nothing the Romans can do can stop it. At this point in the book John has been describing one by one the sounding of the Seven Trumpets, which in his vision represent God's judgment on a world that has rejected him as God. Chapters 10 and 11 up to verse 14 form the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet, and then the seventh and final trumpet is blown in verse 15.

Look with me at verse 15:

11:15 Then the seventh angel sounded 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 will reign forever and ever.*"

So this passage, as we'll see, is about our time, the church age: this is where we are now – between the sixth and seventh trumpet. The next item on the biblical calendar for us is the return of Jesus and the final consummation of his kingdom. And the message God wants us to take from this passage is this: as you carry out God's gospel work in the world, in the shadow of the seventh trumpet, don't despair, keep going, keep preaching the gospel, keep looking to the end.

Well before we get into the passage let's ask for God's help...

PRAY: Our dear heavenly Father, as we turn to your Word, please open our hearts to receive your truth so that we might be encouraged to do the work you have prepared for us to do. Amen.

11:1-3 setting the scene

The first three verses are tightly packed and highly symbolic. But we need to carefully unpack them because they **set the scene** for the rest of the passage: if you'd like to follow with me they tell us the where, the when and the who of the narrative that follows.

Where?

First of all the where:

In verse 1 John is told, by God to go and measure the temple:

V 1: I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told 'Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshippers there.'

Notice he is not just told to measure a building, the temple, but to measure off the altar and the *people worshipping* there. Whereas in the OT God's presence was symbolized in the Temple building, now God's presence in the world is in his people. It is not the Temple in Jerusalem which John is to measure, but the people of God, on earth who represent the heavenly temple.

We know from other parts of the Bible – such as Ezekiel’s great vision of the heavenly Temple in Ezekiel 40-48 – that the act of *measurement* is symbolic of God’s promise of protection. *So here we have a picture of God’s protection of his people in a dangerous world.* His people are measured, numbered, accounted for.

And as well as numbered and protected: the people of God are separated from the world, distinct, measured off, v 2:

V 2: But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months.

So in terms of the *where* of our passage there are two spheres of existence marked out – the church and outside, the world, referred to here paradoxically, as the holy city, which belongs to the Gentiles.

Well that’s a clear and true to life picture of the church isn’t it? Isn’t that true to our experience as Christians in a pagan world: Trampled *but* protected: that’s the story of the church in the world.

Secondly the when:

When?

You may have noticed that there are two time references in these first verses. Verse 2 **‘They will trample on the holy city for 42 months’** Verse 3: **‘I will give power to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for 1,260 days.’** Now for those who are quick at maths, did you notice the connection between 42 months and 1,260 days? The 42 months equals the 1,260 days of verse 3, the period that God’s two witnesses will prophesy for. Now for those who are both very quick at maths *and* have brilliant biblical memories, you may have worked out that 1,260 days, or 42 months equals 3 ½ years which is the all important time frame mentioned in the Book of Daniel in the OT, ‘the times, time and half a time’ – of Daniel 12. Why 3 ½? Well 3 ½ is half of seven, which, in the Bible, is the number of perfection and completion, so 3 ½ years is a period of time that is not eternity, a period of time that will be interrupted, cut short – it is

our time, the church age: a time with an end point

If some of that went over your head do not worry – John is simply using symbolic language which his readers would have been very familiar with, and he’s saying that the time he is talking about is our time.

Thirdly the who: who are these two mysterious witnesses?

Who?

Well it all depends how you approach the Book of Revelation. You can imagine that a passage like this has not passed through Christian history without attracting some imaginative interpretations. Just about anybody you care to think off appears somewhere in the commentaries as one of the two witnesses: they are Enoch and Elijah, because they both ascended to heaven; they are the law and the prophets; they are Peter and Paul; the Old and New Testaments; they are two Jewish high priests who were killed in AD 68; they are the martyrs; they are the Waldensians; the Bohemian Brethren: they are Wycliff; Hus; Jerome of Prague: Luther and Calvin; they are modern day American evangelists whose deaths will be broadcast on Satellite TV.

Well what do you think? Did you spot yourself in the passage as it was read? These witnesses are you!! And me, and all the others. Its clear when you ask the question, not ‘what are their names’, but ‘what are they *doing?*’ What they are doing is witnessing: that is they are preaching the gospel; they are evangelizing; they are talking to people about Jesus,. They are prophets, they are God’s witnesses, they are the people of God, who maintain the faithful witness to Christ: they are you and me!

So that’s the scene that John sets for us to begin with. For the entire church age God’s testimony about Jesus goes forth in the context of a world trampled by pagans, but under God’s protection, and with his power.

In the remaining verses which follow the careers of the two witnesses, we see three

good reasons for hope and encouragement in this situation.

1) The inevitability of conflict throughout the church age

The trampling by the pagan rulers of the world in verse 2 is played out in the rest of the passage in terms of a viscous deadly conflict between the world and the witnesses. In verses 5-6 they are involved in what sounds like some kind of war, and all the way through there is this violent conflict and intense hostility between the church and the world which results in the death of the two witnesses.

Remember that John is writing to Christians who are doing it tough. The persecution of the Emperor Nero – the one who used to burn Christians to light up his garden at night – was still a memory, and for whom life lived as a Christian was life lived under the threat of persecution from all quarters, and so John adds this experience to cosmic drama of the two witnesses.

V 7: Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them.

As he so often does, John, in a single sentence, lifts the lid and we see a whole cosmic, supernatural dimension at work, behind our everyday experience. The readers of the book are fearful and traumatized: John says, don't despair, this is the way it is for now, and your suffering is part of a larger picture.

I'm not at all fond of creepy crawlies- especially woodlice – they really do give me the heeby jeeby's. I particularly hate the way they inhabit this kind of unseen world – they are there all the time but you can't see them. They're there all the time, – in your house and in your garden in their teeming millions – but it's only when you lift up some stone or shine a torch down a drain, or move the fridge for the first time in 5 years, that you see them – scuttling and bustling around, always busy, but silent and stealthy. Sometimes deadly as well if come across a red back or funnel web. Well that is a pretty good description of the spiritual forces of evil in the world. Satan and his servants, here in

verse 7 introduced as 'the beast that comes up from the abyss' shares our world with us. His activity is apparent to all apart from the spiritually blind. His effects are felt by all. But he is secret, hidden, disguised, deceptive, dissembling. You cannot see him. You are tempted not even to believe he is there.

You see what John does now is lifts up the stone which we never want to lift up – and he shows us in the stroke of a pen, the satanic underbelly of his readers' suffering.

By the way as you'll have seen in this series this is one of the unique and brilliant things about the book of Revelation – it shows us the reality behind our experience. As we read it our perception of the world hopefully is transformed – we see things more and more with a gospel perspective. Suddenly now, we don't see persecution as simply bad luck – being at the wrong place at the wrong time, but it's part of a bigger battle that is being played out. And the reality we are shown is a description that is true for the whole of the Christian life. In other words, contrary to how this is so often read, we are not meant to see this as a *prediction* of some final, overwhelming defeat of God's witnesses, but the daily experience of defeat that the people of God experience in the world – part of the normal Christian life is to experience the constant chaffing of the beast.

And this normal Christian life follows the pattern of the life of Jesus. This is the case everywhere in Revelation – Jesus is the hero of the story but he is also the template or model for his disciples. We follow him in our vocation as witnesses, for example, we follow him into the battle. You can see this clearly in v 8: here the world is identified with two classic antagonists of God in the OT – Egypt and Sodom. And the witnesses are identified with Jesus, in the beastly death also suffered at the hands of that world.

V 8: Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom or Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.

It's striking isn't it how easy it is, if we read the book christologically –that is if we remember this is a story about Christ and the gospel – how easy it is to interpret even

these mixed images. Commentators scratch their heads over these verses – who are these men who die where Jesus died which is obviously Jerusalem, yet it's now called Sodom and Egypt. But it's not so difficult if we approach the book in the way it wants to be approached.

The Christian life follows the pattern of Christ's own life. Like him his people, in their entirety, will suffer terribly and appear utterly defeated.

And while this terrorizing of the beast can and does lead to actual physical death for Christians, what John has in mind is also true to our own experience here and now: the way we most powerfully feel the work of the beast in our situation is... in the appearance of utter defeat and irrelevancy of the Church in the world.

Our weapons appear weak. The word of God, the Gospel, the church. When was the last time you heard a non-believer speak of these things admiringly – 'wow – your church is amazing' – do you get that?

No visible victory is not the experience of the church now. The experience of the church is the experience of Jesus – humiliation and contempt. Like those defeated in war, the bodies of the witnesses are hung up as a mark of their absolute defeat, their total humiliation: V 9:

V 9: For three and half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial.

Doesn't this appearance of utter defeat and experience of humiliation characterize the church's constant experience in the world? The world loves to think of the gospel as an utter irrelevancy.

Think of what the world celebrates about Christian things: think of the way newspapers report Christianity. What are they interested in, what do they celebrate. A little while ago a briefing article said there are four stories any newspaper editor is interested in: the left wing church leader challenges the government on human rights issues; church leader in moral compromise story; dying church story; wacky heretic re-writes the Bible story. I was at a conference yesterday with 220 mainly young people

spending their Saturday thinking about how to teach the Bible better to children and young people. Will that make the paper? No but when one stupid vicar has a sex change, or when one stupid archbishop decides to spend his Christmas radio broadcast dabbling in politics that will make the paper.

V 10: The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.

1) *The inevitability of conflict throughout the church age*

2) The assurance of power in the gospel witness

Despite the appearance of defeat and failure the witnesses to Christ goes forward: the witnesses are given power by God to prophesy for the duration of the rule of the Gentiles, v 3:

V 3: And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1260 days clothed in sackcloth.

They are clothed in sackcloth because the gospel that they preach is one of repentance and they themselves live under it and preach it in humility. But the power they are given, if we look carefully at John's description, is quite astonishing. For a start, in verse 4 they look like Zerubbabel the governor of Judah and Joshua the high priest, in Zechariah 4:

V 4: These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.

In Zechariah 4 Zerubbabel and Joshua are responsible for rebuilding the temple after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon, and although this second temple looks tiny and insignificant compared to the original, they are given the word of the Lord which said 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit' says the Lord Almighty. In Zechariah's vision they are the two olive trees which continually feed the lampstand with an inexhaustible supply of oil for its light. *So verse 4 is talking about the inexhaustible power that we have in our work of proclaiming the gospel.*

But this power is not only inexhaustible – it is extraordinarily potent, for in verses 5 and 6 these witnesses now sound like the two great Old Testament characters who famously contended with God’s enemies, Moses and Elijah: the fire, the stopping of the rain (!), the plagues.

As we read these verses again I want you to imagine yourself in a situation in which you are trying to share the gospel with someone – perhaps a colleague at work – and you’re finding it hard going because this person just doesn’t want to know, or doesn’t believe you or despises Christianity or whatever:

5. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. 6. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

Well does that ring true with your experience of witnessing to Christ? Do you feel the power of the gospel like that? Or is there some dissonance between this picture and our experience of gospel preaching? Of This is a description of Robo-Cop, not me, weak-kneed and quivering on some strangers doorstep with a dog-eared copy of Two Ways to Live in my sweaty hand. What is John really saying?

Some suggest this is a kind of positive thinking exercise...

I worked for a few years for an insurance company and one day my boss presented me with a large plastic box, full of tapes and videos and books and said, ‘Here you are, you need to do this!’. I took the box back to my desk and had a look. It was one of those teach-yourself courses featuring John Cleese from Fawlty Towers: it was *an assertiveness training course!* Well to this day I have never understood why he thought I needed it – I was always perfectly happy sitting behind my desk sending emails to people I needed to talk to!

Is that what this picture is for us? An assertiveness course for Christians? The

power of positive thinking and all that kind of thing.

Notice that the purpose of the power which God gives his witnesses, verse 3, enables them to prophesy, and notice that the fire in verse 5 comes - not down from heaven - but from their mouths. This power that the witnesses have at their disposal is none other than the power of the gospel itself. As God says to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 5 ‘I will make my words in your mouth a fire and these people the wood it consumes’.

Doesn’t that give you confidence to preach the gospel? It seems such a weak and foolish thing, this gospel we have – about a man called Jesus who lived and died 2000 years ago. It’s unimpressive, improbable and to the world ruled by pagans, irrelevant.

Revelation peels back the appearance of things and shows us the reality behind those appearances: and we are meant to see the real power of our weapons – the word of God, the gospel we speak is more than powerful enough to do God’s work. That’s what 5-6 are about.

as Paul puts it ‘we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To one..the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life’.

1) *The inevitability of conflict throughout the church age*

2) *The assurance of power in the gospel witness*

3) The assurance of vindication in the final judgment.

We’ve seen in verses 7-10 how weak and pathetic the work of God in his people can look. And we know don’t we how we might despair at our non-existent credibility

And so John points us to the good future that God has established for his people, which gives us hope. And in the remaining verses we see this future played out for us personally, in the careers of the two witnesses, and cosmically in the blowing of the Seventh Trumpet.

The beast, remember, actually kills the two witnesses, verse 7. That doesn’t mean that the people of God will be utterly annihilated at some point in history, but I take it that

the fact that they are dead for 3 ½ days, verse 9, suggests that throughout the age, throughout the 3 ½ years, this is the experience of Christians over and over. And then in verse 11, in a situation that brings to mind that great resurrection account in the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37 when the mighty army of God arises from the ground, the witnesses are resurrected:

V11: But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them.

Just as they followed Christ in the way they died, the witnesses share in his resurrection. And just as the gospel they preached was invincible, so their very lives are unquenchable, marked by God, divinely protected, eternally secure. And so in verse 12 we see that they emerge from deadly bestial pagan trampling victorious and vindicated:

V 12: Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them 'Come up here'. And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.

This total reversal of fortunes which sees those who gloated and celebrated now struck with terror, is seen also in the natural disasters which continually strike the earth, verse 13, and which themselves point towards the final judgment. And at last that judgment, the good end that God had promised and that was won on the cross, is announced by the Seventh Trumpet. And yes, this now is talking about the future, when, verse 15:

V 15:...The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.

Well how does knowing this final victory help us to live now? We feel like we've got sticks for guns. How does it help us to not despair in gospel work? Well I think rather it works more like those great motivational speeches of Sir Winston Churchill during the Second World War. If you're anywhere near my age bracket your knowledge of that period in history may well be confined to various repeats of Dad's Army. But I do love those famous speeches of Churchill which gave the

allies such confidence in victory that they continued the battle. Here's a snippet from one from 1940:

"You ask what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war by sea, by land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us: to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim. I answer in one word: victory. Victory at all costs, victory in spite of terror; victory however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival"

It was that vision of victory which gave people courage to fight: you may just be able to picture those old men who made up the amateur army known as the Home Guard, with their sticks for guns singing victory songs like: 'who do you think you are kidding Mr. Hitler..'

They had Churchill's' vision of Victory. We have John's vision of the Seventh Trumpet. So as we live our lives struggling to carry out our God-given task of proclaiming the gospel, that gospel will go on, and we need not despair for: we know that the conflict is inevitable, we have divine power for the task, and we take comfort from that final longing for vindication, when, verse 15:

The Kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever. Amen.

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- ID OF THE WITNESSES

There is more to say on this. Part of it is how the whole book works. In Rev the reader is meant to be sucked into the story – it's set out in the prologue that this is the story of Christ – it's his story, and he is the hero. As we see Christ's story our view of reality and the world and our lives are meant to be transformed as we understand the gospel shaped nature of things. E.g. persecution – we can now see the spiritual evil behind it; e.g. hope we can now see the concrete object of hope in the new creation etc.

But as well as the hero Jesus is also the template or model for the Christian life as we identify with him. We never become the hero –but his goals, battles, suffering, and vindication become the blue print for the Christian life.

This is especially true in the area of witnessing: 1: Jesus is the faithful witness – but later Christians are witnesses. E.g. also the overcomer – To him who overcomes in 2 and 3 7 times! – but then in 17 we see it is the lamb who overcomes or has already overcome, we overcome too because of him.

Not difficult to see how the pattern of the witness – witness, persecution, death and resurrection, follow this template – but clearly they are not Christ because there are two of them.