

“The Third Woe Is Coming Soon”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 17

Texts: Revelation 11:1-19; Zechariah 4:1-14

Throughout the Book of Revelation, John has spoken of the church on the earth during the last days, the time of great tribulation. But even in the midst of the church’s struggle against the satanically empowered beast, God’s people are sealed and protected from the wrath of God as well as from those demonic forces unleashed upon the earth. But John has also described the church in heaven, triumphant and awaiting the great day of resurrection and judgment yet to come. And now, during the interlude of Revelation 10 and 11 John speaks to the subject of the mission of the church on the earth. Not only is the church to preach the bittersweet word of law and gospel to the nations, the church is also to bear witness that God’s wrath is coming upon the whole earth.

We have been working our way through the seven trumpet judgments recorded in Revelation 8-11. In Revelation chapters 8-9, we dealt with the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments in which God’s wrath is poured out upon one third of the earth. Recall that when John witnessed the angel sound the fifth trumpet, he saw a star cast down from heaven to earth—symbolic of a fallen angel—now given the power by Christ himself to unlock the abyss, the realm of the demonic. Now released from their imprisonment, the demonic horde, depicted by John in the symbolic language of stinging scorpions and destructive locusts, is freed to assault all those upon the earth who have rejected the gospel and who are not sealed with the name of Jesus Christ. Those sealed are the 144,000, who are protected from the wrath of God and from this demonic host which now mercilessly turns upon all those who worship the Beast and his image.

Then, when the sixth trumpet sounds, John witnesses the release of four angels who bring death and destruction upon one third of the earth. When the four angels go forth, John sees 200 million soldiers waging a series of endless wars across the earth, leaving death and destruction everywhere in their wake. These are the armies of the world’s great nations, empowered by Satan, waging war upon each other, in effect, doing the serpent’s bidding, which is to deceive, rob and destroy. And yet, despite the havoc wrought upon the earth by the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments, the earth’s inhabitants still refuse to repent. Although at times things get so bad that the inhabitants of the earth wish they were dead, their wish is not granted.

According to John, the men and women still worship demons. They still create and worship idols rather than worship and serve the true and living God. The earth’s inhabitants still rely upon their own righteousness, rejecting the only righteousness which can account them righteous before God, the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Therefore, one more trumpet blast will sound. One more final woe is coming upon the earth. Indeed, just as the seventh trumpet blast from Israel’s priests brought about the destruction of the walled city of Jericho, when John witnesses the angel sound the seventh trumpet, the city of man, Babylon the Great, will be laid waste and all the earth’s inhabitants will face the wrath and judgment of God. There will be no more time to repent. The great day of judgment has finally come and all who know not Christ will face the wrath of God in all of its horrible fury.

But before describing the seventh and final trumpet in the latter part of Revelation 11, there is an interlude in which John describes the mission of church of Jesus Christ upon the earth during the time of tribulation. As God had commanded the prophet Ezekiel to eat the scroll—an act which is symbolic of

internalizing the contents of the scroll so that the prophet could preach the word of covenant blessing and curse to disobedient Israel—so now the mighty angel of Revelation 10:1 commands the apostle John to likewise take the scroll and to eat it. This is the same scroll which the prophet Daniel said had been sealed until the time of end, but which has been opened by the Lamb along with its seven seals, which are the seven seal judgments depicted Revelation 6-8:1, judgments which, in many ways, parallel the seven trumpet judgments here in Revelation 8-11.

When John eats the scroll, at first it tastes as sweet as honey, but it quickly turns bitter in his stomach. The message contained in the scroll is bittersweet. It contains a word of blessing, but also a word of curse. Like Ezekiel, John is to proclaim these bittersweet words—the law and the gospel—as well as that word of woe which declares that God’s wrath is coming upon the earth. Although God’s people are sealed with the name of Christ and protected from God’s judgment as well as from the demonic hordes unleashed from the abyss, nevertheless, at times, God’s people must face the rage of Satan in the form of the Beast and all those who ally themselves with him. And John, who has received from the angel this revelation of Jesus Christ, is now instructed to pass along this bittersweet word to Christ’s church, which, in turn, is commanded to proclaim this message of blessing and curse to all the nations and their kings. According to John, this is the mission of the church during this time of great tribulation.

Therefore, all the while the two series of cyclical judgments—the seals and the trumpets—are sent by God against the earth and it’s inhabitants, God’s people are to be about the business of preaching the law and the gospel. The church declares God’s word of woe, fully confident that we are protected from God’s wrath and from these frightful demonic legions, even while we are called to face the Beast and all those who do his bidding. When the contents of the little scroll are revealed by the angel to John, and in turn passed along to us, we have been given our marching orders as the church of Jesus Christ. We must preach the law and the gospel. We must announce the word of woe to the ends of the earth. And we must do so in the face of opposition from all of those who serve the Beast and worship his image.

But let us not forget that it is the prayers of the saints which bring about the trumpet judgments. When we pray, God acts to vindicate our righteous cause. God has given to us the truth of the gospel, which exposes the deceptive ways of the devil and reminds us of the certain defeat of our enemies. We may be prevented from buying and selling because we proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that Caesar, the Emperor, the Fuhrer, and the President are not. We must confess Jesus as Lord, even if it costs us our lives. John told us that when the beast wages war upon the saints and kills them, the saints come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. Therefore, we cannot lose. We cannot be defeated. Christ has won the ultimate victory when he triumphed over death and the grave, and his victory is ours. This, beloved, is John’s message throughout the Book of Revelation. And here in this interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet judgments, John describes this struggle against the beast, that struggle we have already discussed in the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3, but which is now seen from the perspective of the church’s mission to the ends of the earth.

Having covered the material in Revelation 10 last time, recall that the interlude between the final two trumpet judgments continues in Revelation 11:1-14, when John speaks of two mysterious witnesses upon the earth, witnesses who are killed because of their testimony of Christ, but who are also vindicated by God.

In the first two verses of Revelation 11, John continues to describe the heavenly scene. But the focus shifts from the mighty angel with the scroll to the heavenly temple. Says John, *“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 worshipers*

there. 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.” Before we say anything about this passage, it is important to remind ourselves of the fact that this is apocalyptic language. It is highly symbolic and not to be interpreted literally. As we have seen, the key to understanding the symbols John uses is the Old Testament and as well as how these symbols have been used elsewhere in the Book of Revelation.

In the prior interlude between the six and seventh seal judgment of Revelation 7, John has already described the church on earth (the 144,000) and the church in heaven (the great multitude no can count). He sees the same scene again, only this time in terms of the temple. John has already told us that the church on earth suffers during the great tribulation while the church in heaven triumphs. This is the interpretive key here as well. Remember the parallels we saw last time between Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry and John’s. Both were commanded to eat scrolls, symbolic of the messages they were to preach. Ezekiel was to preach to disobedient Israel, while John was to preach to the nations. Recall that at the end of Ezekiel’s prophecy beginning in the 40th chapter, Ezekiel describes the heavenly temple, and how he watched while the angel measured it and recorded its dimensions (40:5).¹

This time John is commanded to measure the temple himself using the measuring rod given him by the angel. What jumps out as us is the fact that John is to count all the worshipers within. Later on in Revelation 21, John will describe the temple in great detail, its size and its appearance. Here, John is preoccupied with those within the temple walls, safely dwelling in heaven. The symbolism should be obvious. Throughout the New Testament the people of God are depicted as the temple of God, indwelt by his Spirit.

This is an especially prominent theme in Paul’s writings (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:20-22) and in Peter’s as well (1 Peter 2:4-10; 4:14-17). It is also important to recall that John has already told us in Revelation 3:12, *“Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”* When he measures the temple, John is counting the members of the triumphant church in heaven, surrounding the altar where the prayers of the suffering saints upon the earth ascend to heaven.²

But John also sees the outer court of the temple, which is given to the Gentiles, and which he is not to measure. This is symbolic of the church suffering upon the earth for 42 months. As we have seen in our earlier discussion of the prophecy of the seventy weeks in Daniel 9:24-27, 42 months is three and a half years. This same period of time is mentioned throughout the Book of Revelation, sometimes referred to as the 1260 days, or as “a time, a times and half a time,” but all referring to a period of time 3 ½ years long, the same time period as the last half (3 ½ years) of the seventieth week of Daniel. According to Daniel, it is that time after the anointed one, Jesus Christ, has come to finish transgression, put an end to sin, atone for wickedness, seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy (Daniel 9:24) until the final jubilee is ushered in by Jesus Christ as his second coming.

In Daniel’s prophecy, (9:26) the messiah is cut off in the middle of the seventieth week of years, in the middle of the 70th “7.” In doing so he confirms a covenant with the many for the final seven years (9:27),

¹ See Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 163-164.

² Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 166.

leaving the last three and half years of the seventieth week yet to be fulfilled before God's ultimate jubilee is ushered in and all captives are freed and all debts are paid. Here in Revelation 11:2, John now interprets this last half of the seventieth week of Daniel 9:24-27 (the 42 months), to be a reference to the church age, that period of time known as the great tribulation and the last days, which is the entire period of time between the first advent and the second coming of Jesus Christ. To put it as simply as possible, in Revelation 11:1-2, John sees the church triumphant in terms of the heavenly temple, and the church militant on the earth—the outer court—now trampled down by the Gentiles for 42 months (the remaining 3 ½ years of Daniel's 70 weeks prophecy). This is the suffering church upon the earth. The scene clearly echoes Revelation 7, as John sees the same scene and period of time, but from yet another vantage point (or camera angle).

In Revelation 11:3, John's focus shifts from the temple to the earth to two mysterious witnesses who preach the gospel to the nations at great cost to themselves, but who are vindicated by God in the end. In verse 3 we read that the one who instructed John to measure the temple will "*give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.*" Throughout the New Testament, God calls his people to be witnesses of Jesus Christ, since we have been entrusted with his testimony as to his person and his work.³ But these two witnesses, clothed in sackcloth and ashes, recall to mind several images from the Old Testament—Hezekiah and the king of Nineveh put on sackcloth and ashes, symbolic of repentance (Isaiah 37:1-2; Jonah 3:5). Jesus reminds us that the wicked cities of Tyre and Sidon would have done the same if Jesus had performed his miracles there (Matthew 11:2).

Furthermore, there are two witnesses mentioned because two is the number of witnesses required to establish the truth of their testimony.⁴ Given the fact that they are to preach for 1260 days (the same length of time as the 42 months, during which the outer court of the temple is trampled down by the Gentiles), their ministry extends throughout the entire church age. But this still begs the question, "who are these guys?"

Beginning in verse 4, their identity is revealed. "*These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. 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. 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.*" Once again, the key to understanding John's symbolic language is the Old Testament.

As we have seen in our Old Testament lesson, Zechariah used these same images—the two olive trees which supply oil for the lampstand—to refer to Zerubbabel, the royal figure who was to rebuild the temple, and Joshua, the priest who would lead the people of God in their worship of YHWH. Both of these two men in turn pre-figure the coming of Israel's messiah. Like Moses, the two witnesses described by John can bring destructive plagues upon the earth. Like Elijah they can shut up the sky and destroy their enemies with fire. Therefore, the two witnesses are clearly prophets, and the allusion to Zerubbabel and Joshua, means that they are kings and priests as well.⁵

³ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 170.

⁴ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 170.

⁵ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 170.

The vision of the two witnesses, then, is a symbolic picture of the church upon the earth during the entire time of tribulation. They are not to be interpreted literally, as is often done by our dispensationalist friends, who teach that Moses (or Enoch) and Elijah will physically return to the earth during the seven year tribulation, only to be killed by the Antichrist. We know that this is symbolic of the entire church for three reasons.

First, in Revelation 5:10, John has already stated that God's people are constituted "*a kingdom and priests to serve our God,*" who "*will reign on the earth.*" Here John adds a prophetic role to the kingly and priestly offices.

Second, we are also told in verse 7, that "*when [the two witnesses] have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them,*" a statement which is virtually repeated in Revelation 13:7 when we read that the Beast "*was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them.*" The Revelation 13:7 text is a clear reference to the beast's assault upon the church.

Finally, when we consider that these two witnesses minister during the same period of time as the outer court of the temple is trampled by the Gentiles (1260 days/42 months), it is clear that these two witnesses are symbolic of Christ's church upon the earth during the entire church age as she proclaims the bittersweet words of law and gospel while warning the inhabitants of the earth of the final woe, yet to come. But because of their message, the beast turns upon them whenever empowered by Satan, and kills them, seeking to silence them.

But as long as their mission to preach the gospel has not been completed, they are protected by God through the judgments which come upon the earth, judgments which sound very much like the four horsemen of the seal judgments and the first four of the trumpet judgments. Indeed, the fire which destroys their enemies, the drought which befalls the earth, the calamities which come upon the sea and the various plagues which God sends upon the earth through the two witnesses, echo the seal judgments John has already described in Revelation 6:-8:1 and the trumpet judgments of Revelation 9-11. God protects his people and frustrates his enemies.

But then when the witnesses' mission is complete, the beast is finally allowed to take their lives. According to verses 8-11, "*Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. 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.*" Having been killed by the beast, the bodies of the witnesses lie unburied in the great city, later on depicted as Babylon the Great, but here depicted as Sodom, a prime Biblical image of godlessness, and as Egypt, that nation which cruelly held the people of God in slavery.

The reference to the place where Jesus was crucified has led some to believe that John sees the witnesses as actually dying in Jerusalem during the supposed 7-year tribulation. But since the context is the church's witness to the world, the point may simply be that since Jesus died in Jerusalem, rejected by his people, the earthly Jerusalem ironically becomes a symbol of the rejection of Christ by the entire city of man, epitomized by Babylon the great.⁶ Nevertheless, the church faithfully bears witness of Jesus

⁶ See the discussion of this in; Beale, [The Book of Revelation](#), 591 ff.

Christ throughout the entire church age (the 3 ½ years, 42 months and 1260 days) while the beast's apparent triumph is symbolically much shorter, only 3 ½ days. Refusing to bury the corpse of one's enemy was, in the ancient world, the ultimate sign of contempt. As the world's inhabitants rejoice at the death of the witnesses, their bodies are left in the street unburied, a symbolic sign of just how much the world hates them and their message.

But the world can never defeat the kingdom of God. We read in verse 11, that "*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.*" Here again, there are loud echoes from Ezekiel's prophecy in 37:10, where Ezekiel writes, "*So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.*" Just when the beast appears to triumph, God raises up a mighty army to continue the church's witness. Furthermore, as we have already seen earlier in this book, when the beast kills the saints, they come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. John sees the same thing here, this time in the context of the church's mission. "*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 symbolic resurrection and ascension into heaven strikes terror in the hearts of all those who hate Christ and reject his gospel. Just when the witnesses appear to have been shamed and humiliated, God vindicates them.

But not only does God's vindication of the witnesses strike terror in the hearts of those who persecute the church, so does the judgment of God which now comes upon the great city which foreshadows the final judgment yet to come. Says John, "*at that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.*" This earthquake destroys a tenth of city, perhaps as part of the seal and trumpet judgments, and clearly prefigures the sixth seal judgment, which is the great earthquake associated with the cosmic renewal which accompanies the return of Jesus Christ to earth. In an amazing bit of irony, John now describes how 7000 unbelievers are killed, the same number of true believers who remained in Israel during the time of Elijah. Having watched God preserve his people and vindicate his cause, when his hand of judgment comes against the earth, the people of the great city's response is to be terrified and give God glory. But it may be too late.

According to John, with the interlude now complete, "*the second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon.*" The end has now come and John witnesses "*The seventh angel sound . . . his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.'*" The boastful and blasphemous city of man has fallen and the New Jerusalem will take its place. The kingdom of God has indeed triumphed over all the enemies of God and of his people. And this kingdom—unlike Babylon the Great, will never end.

The glorious news of the destruction of the city of man means the end of the age is at hand, and all of heaven rejoices. Says John, "*the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: 'We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great—and for destroying those who destroy the earth.'*" Indeed, the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. Then, we read, "*God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.*"

The revelation contained in the scroll given John by the angel is now complete. The presence of the ark before the altar, and which was carried before the armies of Israel when Jericho fell, is the final reminder that when the seventh trumpet has sounded, the city of man is destroyed. The lightening, thunder and the great earthquake are the signs that God has now fully revealed his glory. The full mystery of our redemption has been revealed and God has brought all things to their appointed end.⁷

But while the beast wages war upon the church, we must never forget that we are sealed with the name of Christ, forever safe from the wrath of God and the forces of hell. We have been given the truth and gospel as well as our marching orders as a church. As the seal and trumpets judgments come forth from the throne of God, we are the witnesses of Jesus Christ, preaching the bittersweet word of law and gospel, and announcing to an unbelieving world, "*the third woe is coming soon.*" But what for the world is a day of terror, is for us, the glorious day of our redemption. It is a day we do not dread. It is a day for which we long!

Come quickly Lord Jesus! Amen!

⁷ Poythress, [The Returning King](#), p. 131.