

The Two Witnesses and the Story of your Life

Revelation 11:3-13

Turn to Revelation 11. We'll start at v3 and read to v13.

This vision of the two witnesses in symbolic language tells the life story of every follower of Christ. In picture language, this is the basic plot of your life, each one of you, and of my life.

This vision divides our lives into three scenes: life, death, and triumph. Our present life gets one scene, our deaths get one scene, and one scene for our public triumph when the Lord returns.

Revelation will not let us view just these present lives as the core of being a Christian. No, Revelation takes us to the final End again and again, eight or ten times. We cannot understand being a child of God within the boundaries of this present life. Being a Christian makes no sense if that is all we will see. Paul: we fix our eyes on what is unseen.

Each of our lives has three scenes: faithful life, humiliating death, and public triumph.

First, let's talk about the two cities of Revelation, then we'll get to the three scenes. Rev has the holy city, and the great city. First the holy city. Revelation 21 tells us clearly that the holy city is the bride of Christ. The holy city is the church, the saints, all believers together.

We are called a city because we are all agreed that we will worship the One on the Throne and the Slaughtered Lamb that Lives. In Revelation, that worship is our *witness*. The only things that comes out of the mouths of God's people in Revelation are worship and prayer. We pray to the One on the Throne, and we him and we worship the Lamb. That is the center of our *witness*.

Revelation has no interest that I can find in present day Jerusalem. Rev has the New Jerusalem, which is the holy city = the bride after Christ returns. If there is a new Jerusalem, there is an old Jerusalem, but Rev ignores it, except for one line, the city where our Lord was crucified, and that is a bad place, that is part of the great city that has the flavour of Sodom and Egypt.

The *holy* city is God's people. The *great* city is all the people that rebel against God and the Lamb. It is Babylon, so named in Genesis 11 because what came out of *their* mouths was babble. This world is made up of little pockets of the holy city living faithfully in the middle of the great city. That's who we are, that's who every church is.

That is not a polite way to speak of unbelieving neighbours, and the Bible does not always talk like that. But Revelation was written for churches facing severe persecution, to help them understand and endure their difficult lives. When the church faces persecution, this image helps.

Scene One of Our Lives: A Life of Faithful Witness – 11:3-6 *And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.*⁴ They are “the two olive trees” and the two lampstands, and “they stand before the Lord of the earth.”

They are two witnesses, and they prophesy. In Revelation, *witness* and *prophecy* sometimes mean the same thing. In v3, they are *witnesses*, and they will *prophesy*. In v6 we read about the time of their *prophesying*, and in v7 we learn what happens when their *witness* is complete.

So are they witnesses or prophets? Which is it? Both. In Revelation, all believers are considered *witnesses* (6:9; 12:11, 17; 19:10; 20:4). And remember that in Revelation, the only thing that comes out of people’s mouths is prayers or worship. That makes us *witnesses*.

We do not have the gift of *prophecy*, or the calling to be *prophets*, but 19:10 says *the witness of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*. The witness of Jesus is the essence of prophecy, the witness of Jesus is the soul of prophecy. The witness of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

That means that if we are *witnesses* of Jesus in the world, we have the role of *prophets*, we have a *prophetic presence* in the world. We are a prophetic voice simply praying to and worshiping the One on the Throne and the Lamb in a world that wants no part of God or the Lamb.

Vv3-4 again. *And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.*⁴ They are “the two olive trees” and the two lampstands, and “they stand before the Lord of the earth.”

1260 days is three and a half years, which we find in Daniel, and ever since Daniel that means a time of trouble. In Rev 12 it’s quite clear that the 3 ½ years begins right after Christ ascends into heaven in Acts 1, so the whole time between the two comings of Christ is the 3 ½ years.

We know what lampstands are, we were told clearly in Rev 1 and 2:1 - churches. Ever since Moses, “two” is the minimum number of witnesses necessary to establish truth.

Jesus *always* sent his followers out in pairs. The two olive trees come from Zech 4, where they represents a steady supply of the Holy Spirit, which God gives the whole church.

So this is you. You are faithful to Christ, you worship him and pray to God and live in his ways, and you are not hiding this. That makes you a witnesses, and means you have a prophetic presence in the world. You are part of a lampstand, which means you are part of a church.

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 *They have power to shut up the heavens 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.*

Wow! These two verses (5-6) contrast with v7: *Now when they have finished their witness, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them.*

When our witness is finished, we are completely vulnerable. All of us. But vv5-6 describe what our lives look like from heaven *before* our witness is finished. *Before* our witness is finished, we are untouchable, nothing can stop us, and horrible things happen to any to try to stop us.

We don't feel this protection, but in fact we do still worship God and the Lamb, and we pray to God, and we live in God's ways: that means our witness is carrying on, it is not over yet, to this very day, all the dark forces that want your witness and mine to end have failed. We're protected.

What about fire and plagues that come from the mouth of the witnesses? Remember that this vision is between the sixth and seventh trumpet judgments. This vision tells us what is going on with God's people during the trumpet judgements.

Rev 8:3-5 tell us that the trumpet judgments come from the *mouths* of God's people, by means of their *prayers*. I want you to listen to what comes out of the mouths of God's people: *Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth.*

The fiery judgements come to earth specifically because of *the prayers of all God's people*. God's people are praying for justice and protection, and God is answering. So in Rev 11, the fire is pictured as coming out of the *mouths* of the witnesses; in a real sense that is entirely true.

So, what is God actually doing to the people who want to stop us? Is God making their lives miserable? It does not look like that to us. People who rebel against God and his ways do sometimes have severe troubles that rarely happen to godly people. But some godly people have severe troubles that many ungodly escape. So I don't know. How does this look from above?

This much is clear: until our witness is complete, we are untouchable. Nothing can stop us from worshipping God, and praying to God, living in his ways, not worshipping anything else. That is our witness, that is our prophecy, and we live protected by God until our witness is done.

That's scene one, that our present lives of witness. Now two scene two, our death, our humiliating defeat and death. Scene two pictures us dying a severe death in a hostile place. Like Jesus, who was publicly humiliated and executed. This scene has in mind people like that.

Some in John's churches died like that, a man named Antipas in the church at Pergamum had already died like that. I was at my aunt's funeral last weekend, and she died peacefully. Scene two pictures most clearly the deaths of the persecuted, but death attacks and overcomes us all.

Scene Two of our Lives: Humiliating Defeat and Death When our Witness is Complete (11:7-10)

Now when they have finished their witness, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. ⁸ Their bodies will lie in the public square of the great city—which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt—where also their Lord was crucified. ⁹ For three and a half days some from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. 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.

V7 describes the beast attacking, overpowering, and killing the two witnesses. In 13:7 it uses the same words to describe what happens to the saints. That is another reason to take the two witnessing lampstands as the whole church. This happens to the whole persecuted church.

We must grab hold of this first phrase: *when they have finished their witness*. Until God thinks we have finished our witness, we cannot be harmed, and those who try are in big trouble. That is not how our lives feel, but that is how they look from the balcony, that is how they look to God.

In Rev 1, when John sees the Lord Jesus, the Lord said to John, *I hold the keys of death and the place of the dead*. The Lord Jesus holds the keys. There is no such thing as an accidental death. Some deaths look like that to us, and others do not.

But no one dies until the Lord turns the key, no believer dies until they have finished their witness. Severely persecuted churches see too many deaths which feel tragic. And they are. But from God's view, those saints had finished their witness, and at that point the dark power attacks and overpowers and kills. Only when we have finished our witness.

In one way or another, death will attack and overpower every one of us, unless the Lord returns. In some way, this will be my story. When my witness is done, death will attack and overpower me and take me. My weakness at that point will humiliating, I will have been defeated by death. Those who resent God will bless my death.

This second scene happens in a society that resents Christians deeply, finds them an unpleasant nuisance, a society that believes it would be much better off if they could get rid of every devoted Christian. This is a society that suffered because it continued to reject God, and those people will be so glad to see the end of us.

Their celebration lasts 3 ½ days. At time of trouble, but not very long. Jesus was in the tomb for a little less than that, but during that time certainly seemed like Jesus had been defeated, and that his enemies had won the day. In this vision, the 3 ½ days is however long we are dead, and our bodies in a state of defeat and humiliation, before the Lord returns. It might be a long time, but in this vision it is pictured as not very long.

Scene 1 of our lives: faithful witness; scene 2, humiliating death; scene 3, public triumph!

Scene Three of our Lives: Public Triumph when the Lord Returns 11:11-13

But after the three and a half days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. 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. ¹³ 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.

Here God’s breath raises us to life, and we stand up on earth. Then a loud voice calls us, and there is a command: “Come up here.” And we go into heaven in a cloud. The cloud is the cloud of God’s presence, the cloud over the tabernacle in the wilderness, which meant God was there.

Jesus in Acts 1 was taken up into a cloud, into the presence of God, and we will enter the same cloud. This story is sort of what happened to Jesus. After three days he was raised, and he walked around on earth for 40 days, and then went up into the cloud.

Here is how we get this in less symbolic language in 1 Thess 4:16-17. *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

Both Scriptures have loud voice, and a command, and the dead raised to life, and being taken up into the cloud that is God’s presence.

The difference is that in Revelation this is all public, it is open to all the enemies of God’s people. . . . *They stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them.... They went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.*

In 1 Thess 4, Paul does not say if these things happen privately or openly. But Revelation puts 1 Thess 4 in front of a watching world. Our enemies and those who resent believers will see that we were right to pray to God and worship him and live in his ways and not worship anyone else.

So, the dead in Christ will rise first and then the rest of us will be changed and caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Will the whole world actually see that with their eyes? I do not know. Revelation does not require that.

But this much Revelation requires: at that time, the world that rebelled against God and wanted no part of Christ will know that they were wrong, and will know that those who worshipped and obeyed Jesus the Lord had it right all along. At that time, all our enemies will know that we were right to trust in God, because he came through for us big time.

Each of us is now in scene one of our lives, we pray to God, worship him and the Lamb, and live in his ways. That is our witness in the world, our prophetic task.

Scene two, when our witness is done and not before, death will attack in some way and defeat us. It will seem that it has all come to nothing, and our enemies will celebrate that we are gone.

Scene three, God breathes his life into our mangled bodies and raises them as eternal bodies, and calls us up to his presence. And all our enemies will see, and those who thought we were fools will see.

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people the most to be pitied. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (1 Cor 15:19; 2 Cor 4:18). Amen.