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REVELATION 11: 1 – 14

A PROPHESYING CHURCH IN A HOSTILE WORLD

You can read the Book of Revelation as some sort of “running commentary” on what is happening in our world. Not in the sense that you can watch the news every evening or read the headlines every morning, and then turn to Revelation to find the exact equivalent in the events described. That would be arbitrary speculation.

And yet, Revelation does give us a unique perspective of the things that are going on in this world. It tells the history of our world through the view from above, the view from heaven, the view of the Almighty God who reigns from heaven above.

We recognize this unique perspective again in Rev. 11. At the end of Rev. 10 John was told: *You must prophesy again*. This ‘prophesying’ becomes now the assignment of the church. And so, we hear in Rev. 11 about the “bitter” experiences the faithful church must endure and overcome, when it preaches the “sweet” gospel of Jesus Christ in this hostile world.

THIS PROPHECY WILL BE SECURED

During the interlude between the sixth and the seventh trumpet blast the apostle John is again actively involved in his vision. It keeps him busy.

This time he is given *a measuring rod*. And with that he is told to *measure the temple of God, and the altar and the people that worship there*. But he is also instructed *not to measure the court outside the temple*.

It only says that “he was told”, and so we do not know who talked to John here. But given the connection with Rev. 10 the voice could be the same as in 10:4, 8 and 11. That may have been the voice of God himself, or the exalted Christ. After all, this voice goes on, at least till the end of v.3, and talks there about “my two witnesses”.

So, John sees a temple. When he received these revelations, there was no longer a temple in Jerusalem. But when he was younger he was, of course, quite familiar with the temple, and he knew how significant the temple had been for God’s people.

In the Old Testament the temple was the very centre of God’s presence on earth, God’s dwelling place in the midst of Israel. And the Holy God could dwell with sinful people because of the altar. That was the place of reconciliation and worship, because of the sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins.

In this way the ‘temple, with the altar’ becomes a symbol for God’s presence on earth, in the midst of the community of his people. The Holy God dwells within the living communion of those who are reconciled to him and worship him. This is the essence of what it means to be a faithful Christian church on earth. In his letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 2:21,22) the apostle Paul calls the church *a holy temple in the Lord*, and then he says to the believers: *In Jesus Christ you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit*.

Now, why this ‘measuring’? Measuring an area is like staking out a property to separate it, claim it and secure it as yours. Then you can protect it against intruders. You build a fence around it and put up signs: “No Trespassing”.

Well, here John's action to measure the temple symbolizes that God secures his claim to safeguard his faithful church.

For the congregation of Jesus Christ, for you and me, there is great comfort in this symbolism. In this hostile world we live under God's protection. As God's children you are his precious possession, bought with the blood of his Son Jesus Christ. That is why God takes care of his church when his judgments are being inflicted on the wicked world. He keeps her as "holy space".

In the Old Testament the 'outer court' belonged to the temple-complex in a broader sense, but it is outside the actual temple. John has to leave that area alone. But what is not measured will not be protected either. And that means that it will come under control of the Gentiles, the nations, God's enemies.

God's enemies come so close to the church, that they will be able to threaten and attack her. In other words, being under God's protection does not mean that the church is not vulnerable. As believers you will face suffering and death. But you will not perish. You will always be secure in God's hands, even if you have to die.

These same enemies of God will also *trample the holy city*. Elsewhere this is often a reference to Jerusalem, but Revelation reserves the name 'Jerusalem' exclusively for the 'New Jerusalem', the city of God. Revelation avoids using the name "Jerusalem" for the wider urban area around the temple, the city that rejected Jesus.

For us this represents the hostile world in which the church is present. It is the world in which we live as God's people.

You can call it 'holy' in the sense that God created it to serve and glorify him. But today human society is run as an "unholy space" by pagans who hate Jesus.

This will go on for forty-two months, the full period between Jesus' first and second coming. It is a time of intense conflict between God's people, the followers of Christ AND their opponents. It is the time of the great tribulation, the suffering and persecution of the church, as it occurs in various ways and in various places as time goes on between Jesus' ascension and return.

This is our time. In the sharp contrast between the church and the world, the church is facing trouble and distress. And yet, even under oppression, within the spiritual reality of God's sanctuary, in his church, faithful worshipers will be secure.

And why is that? Because God has a job for them to do in this final phase of history. In this increasingly pagan and hostile world the Lord protects and secures his faithful church for a purpose. He is sending her into this world with his prophetic message, to continue his work.

And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1260 days.

Here we have another symbolic image: God's two witnesses. "Witnesses" are people who testify to the facts, people who are under oath to tell the truth. In this case, the truth about Jesus Christ and the facts of salvation: that Jesus suffered and was crucified; that he died but rose again; that Jesus is the only Saviour.

The exalted Christ empowers these witnesses to be God's mouth to proclaim his Word. That there are two of them is simply because according to the Law of Moses a testimony is valid if presented by a minimum of two witnesses.

Some think of these witnesses as two specific persons in the history of the Church, or close to the end, just before Jesus' return. But the working period of 1,260 days is the same as the forty-two months of pagan oppression, the whole era between Jesus' ascension and his return.

Rather, these two witnesses represent the faithful church of Christ as it presents the testimony of Jesus in this hostile world, until the final judgment of God's wrath. These prophesying witnesses symbolize us! Today, God sends us into this hostile world to prophesy, just as long as the world is ruled, oppressed by God's enemies. That is, until the glorious day of Jesus' second coming.

The clothing of the witnesses reinforces their message. The *sackcloth* is a symbolic detail that points at the need for penance and repentance. The hostile powers that dominate the world and threaten God's church must be confronted all the time with the message of God's grace and forgiveness, with the urgent call to repent and obey God. But those powers must also be

confronted with the warning of condemnation for those who in unbelief reject the message of Christ.

These two witnesses are models for all of us in the church. You and I are to be faithful to the testimony of Jesus, even in the face of violent persecution. Are you willing to face martyrdom? That may sound pretty far-fetched in our comfortable circumstances in Canada, and in most western countries. But then, you do not know what will happen when you really stand up for Jesus in public.

Always remember that through the testimony of these witnesses, through each one of us, Christ will complete his work in this world. And that in the end God himself guarantees our vindication. Indeed, persecution by God's enemies AND protection by God himself; witnessing AND facing opposition – these are all things that happen in different times and at different locations throughout the last days.

But as they happen, God will secure his prophetic message. We see this illustrated in these witnesses as *the two olive trees and the two lampstands* (v.4).

This image comes from the Old Testament, from the prophet Zechariah (Zechariah 4). There are differences, of course, but the symbolism is the same. The lampstands are spreading the light of God's power and glory. And they can do so without interruption, no matter what happens. They never lack fuel, because the trees supply the lamps with an abundance of oil that keeps the lamps burning.

The picture shows how God, through his witnesses, his whole congregation, wants the bright light of the gospel of Jesus to shine into this dark and hostile world. The testimony of the church may be threatened and under attack, God will secure its flame. He will fuel it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Are you such a lampstand? Are you out there as a light-bearer for the Lord of the earth? Are you faithful to the testimony of Jesus Christ in this hostile world? Do others notice that the burning light of your fire for him cannot be extinguished, fuelled as it is by the power of the Holy Spirit?

But, are we not fighting for a lost cause? That is how it feels sometimes, does it not? And that can be so discouraging.

Trust that God himself will secure the prophetic message with which he sends you into this world. For that reason, he gives his two witnesses enormous powers. The v.5 and 6 show that they are invincible. Our pagan society will try to stop the church from prophesying God's Word. But whatever people try, it will be unsuccessful. People want to get rid of God's message, but God will not let it happen.

The powers of these two witnesses remind us of the authority of Elijah and Moses. Elijah was hated by most Israelites, and Moses was hated by all the Egyptians. But the Lord affirmed their authority by different powerful signs: fire (2 Kings 1; Numbers 15:35), drought (1 Kings 17), water turning to blood (Exodus 7) and other plagues.

Also today, when the church is true to God's Word, it may proclaim with authority that God's judgments will ruin our world when people refuse to repent and turn to Jesus Christ. Our message is not only the good news of salvation, it also includes that judgment against evil-doers is unavoidable. The Church's message is one of power – power to save AND power to punish.

We have seen already what happens when the seven seals were opened, and when six of the seven trumpets sounded, and there is more to come. Why is there so much hatred, misery, violence, war, economic and social turmoil in the world?

Here is the answer: when the world rejects the gospel of Jesus Christ, the testimony of the faithful church, our human society will turn into chaos and suffer God's judgments – now and in the future.

THIS PROPHECY WILL BE SILENCED

God's faithful church may have a powerful message, but it is still vulnerable to hostile attacks, to the point even that it will be silenced. We see this pictured in what happens to the two witnesses. When they have completed their job, it seems that God withdraws his protection and allows more room for other, frightening, hostile forces.

The beast that rises from the bottomless pit (or: the abyss) will make war on them and conquer them and kill them. With brutal violence it will silence the voice of the church.

It says “**the** beast”, as if we have met this monster before. But here in Rev.11 we hear about it for the first time. We will learn more about this bizarre and frightening creature in Rev. 13, but the fact that it *comes up from the abyss* is significant. Because the ‘abyss’ we know from Rev. 9. It is the place where these scorpion-like locusts came from, remember? The ‘abyss’ is hell before God’s final judgment, filled with evil spirits, demons, devils, including Satan himself.

And so this ‘beast from the abyss’ represents a concentration of antichristian power, stirred up by Satan, urged on by hell, driven by devilish hatred, to oppose the truth, to silence the church’s message, to persecute and destroy the Christians and simply snuff out their testimony.

This time the action will be successful. That does not mean that this beast will kill every individual believer, but enough to ruin the organization of the church and silence her voice in this world.

And this is not enough for those enemies. This beast and its followers will be so excited about their success that *the dead bodies of these murdered witnesses* will be on public display *in the street of the great city*.

Did you notice? It is no longer called ‘the holy city’, as in v.2, dominated as it is by the powers from the abyss. Now it is called ‘the great city’. That is an expression we find eight times in Revelation, and it always refers to ‘Babylon’.

From of old ‘Babylon’ was Israel’s powerful adversary, the arch-enemy of God’s people. And so it has become symbolic for the whole antichristian world and culture, which has aggressively rejected the prophetic message of the church.

John emphasizes how evil this city is, by giving it three other symbolic names. “Sodom” stands for thorough wickedness, violence, and filthy immorality. “Egypt” stands for slavery and oppression. And “the city of the crucifixion” stands for deep hatred against Jesus Christ and his followers.

When you bring this all together, this ‘great city’ is the absolute antithesis of the other city in Revelation, the New Jerusalem. The city of this world is the city of man, which opposes God and rebels against him. Babylon is where the beast reigns. And his reign seems powerful and successful.

But do not be mistaken. That is the perspective, the view, from below. However, the view from above shows that where the beast reigns, humanity goes down in chaos, while the city where God reigns will flourish in peace, harmony, and joy. The war between the city of God and the city of man continues throughout history, until Babylon is destroyed⁷ and the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven⁸.

Remember again, that also this death of the two witnesses is not a scenario of a special end-time moment. Throughout the final phase of history, life for the church becomes impossible at different times at different locations. First here, then there, the voice of the church is brutally silenced.

In the image in our chapter it seems as if the hostile political and cultural powers have triumphed. But keep in mind the two different points of view. This is what it looks like from below. However, notice that it says in v.9 that the whole ordeal will be over in 3 ½ days. That’s a symbolic number for a very brief timeframe. The perspective from above tells us that the death of his witnesses will not stop God from reaching his goal. The victory of Christ must be close.

In the meantime (v.9 and 10) the inhabitants of the earth, the hostile and wicked oppressors, are so excited that they throw a big party to celebrate this happy moment. The death of the church is a major victory. Finally, they have been successful in silencing the voice of the Christian witness in the world.

From all over the world people come for an ‘unholy pilgrimage’ to admire the success of the beast, and to mock the remnants of the dead church of Christ. They do not even allow the dead bodies to be buried. That is how deep the hatred is.

7 This is pictured in Revelation 17 and 18

8 This is pictured in Revelation 21 and 22

Yes, the world will be relieved and say, “Finally, they will no longer pester us with their gloom-and-doom messages”. The witness of God’s people is repulsive to God’s enemies. They do not want to hear, and they get fed up with, the biblical testimony. A constant call to repent becomes a real pain in the neck, an annoying torment, if you want to make the world a better place on your own terms, without God.

When you come to think of it, the contrast that is symbolized here sounds pretty extreme. It is black and white. But that has a good reason. You see, when people look at what drives them in life, they usually find a mix of motives. As a believer you want to follow Christ, but your obedience is flawed. It is mixed with sin, and often inconsistent.

On the other hand, non-Christians want to rebel against God. But in practice they are also often inconsistent. They act not as evil as they could, and sometimes they can even imitate good Christian values that they really appreciate.

Now this mix of good and bad, both in you and in the non-Christians around you, has good aspects. It helps you to live in peace among each other and relate to others. It can even open the door for you to testify about your faith in Jesus Christ.

But it can also easily obscure the seriousness of the most fundamental conflict in history, the conflict between the Holy God and his enemies. And since Revelation focuses on the fact that we are all involved in this conflict, it gives a very black-and-white picture of good and evil. The two witnesses are perfectly faithful witnesses of the truth, whereas their opponents are extremely evil and hostile.

And here again Revelation gives us the view from above, to remind us of what is going on behind the scene. This is the reality of our world that is often obscured by the cover of civil and moderate strategies that we use to hide our deepest loyalties.

Look at your own life. Where are you in this deadly conflict? What does your loyalty to Jesus mean for you? And do not ignore, under the veneer of friendliness, the deadly opposition against God and Jesus evident in the lives of others.

THIS PROPHECY WILL BEAR FRUIT

When we turn to the last act of the drama that unfolds in our passage, we learn that the festive mood of v.10 is short-lived. The unholy revellers are too early, for as it turns out, the joy only lasts 3 ½ days. Then suddenly things change. God Almighty interferes in a way no one had counted on.

It says that after 3 ½ days God gives back to these two murdered witnesses *the breath of life*. It reminds us of Gen. 2:7, where it says that God *breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life*. The result is that they can stand *up on their feet* again. This is what happened in the Valley of the Dry Bones, one of the visions of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 37:1-14). In other words, the resurrection that occurs on the main street of the wicked city of Babylon is nothing less than God's miracle of a new creation.

And this is encouraging symbolism. After malicious attacks and severe persecution had wiped out the church, we will see the victory of the church's witness.

We will even see that this testimony will bear fruit, believe it or not!

It is a terrifying experience for God's enemies and for the enemies of the church. They see it happen. This is incredible. The church of Christ was dead, terminated, eliminated, annihilated. But she is back, restored and full of life. Picture them standing there: horror-struck, frozen with fear. The party is over, boys!

You see, when the perspective from above, from heaven, breaks into the perspective from here, from below, God's enemies will panic. It confuses your view and turns your world upside down. The reality is not what you thought it was.

The reality is that the church of Jesus Christ cannot be eliminated permanently from our society, from our world. That is just not possible. The prophetic witness of the church can go through difficult times. Sometimes it is forced to be silent, at least for a while. Then people think they have gotten rid of it. But time and again it comes back into this hostile world.

And the good news is that the gospel will be victorious. A *loud voice from heaven* calls them to ascend up to heaven, beyond the malicious power of their enemies. It says that *their enemies watched them* when it happened. They may hate to admit it, but the fact is that no one will be able to get rid of the church and its urgent and persistent message of salvation in Christ alone.

Then, as if all this is not frightening or astonishing enough, there is at the same time *a great earthquake*. It is a scary reminder of the urgency of the message of these two witnesses: now is the time to repent. The Holy God, who has sent his church to announce his coming, is coming soon in power and glory!

The effect of the earthquake is devastating. Ten percent of the evil world was destroyed and the symbolic number of victims is 7,000. It is significant! Although this is not the end, not yet, it is an alarming and frightening warning of what is coming: *the third woe is soon to come*, it says in v.14.

You may remember that in Rev. 8:13 a flying eagle had announced three woes. The first one appeared with the fifth trumpet blast (Rev. 9:12). The second one has passed with the sixth trumpet. And the third one is almost here. We should all realize that the opportunity to repent is rapidly drawing to a close. There is only a narrow window left.

On the day of the Final Judgment it will be over. But God still reaches out to this world. The earthquake in v.13 leaves many survivors. They are in shock and terrified, but life on earth continues, because our God does not give up. He continues to look for faith and repentance in this dark and hostile world.

And here is the miracle: *they gave glory to the God of heaven*. This is such an incredible twist in this chapter, that some scholars concluded that this cannot be a true repentance. It must be fake, in the sense that only out of fear these people acknowledge God's power. But it does not say so. As a matter of fact, whenever people refuse to repent and give glory to God, it says so in Revelation.

But throughout this final phase of history our God is full of surprises. As things are getting ready for the Final Judgment, the prophetic message of

the church will bear fruit in many lives. People come to glorify God as the One who rules from heaven.

Now, if God does not give up, neither should we. For you and me, for the whole church, the need remains urgent in the last days of this hostile world, to remain a faithful and witnessing church till the very end. Do not be intimidated by hostile attacks.

The Christian witness in our society will not only trigger angry reactions and persecution. It will also bear fruit. Leave that to the Lord. Just keep proclaiming the message, and by his grace people will turn to Jesus Christ and bring glory to God.

This is how God will take you and all his children along on the way to his final victory.

prayers of the saints. What kind of connection could there be between the voice coming from this altar and the frightening and violent destruction that is unleashed by this voice here in Revelation 9? Can Christians pray for God's judgment over evil and wickedness?

3. How does God's love for the world and the joyful message of the Gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ – how does that fit with the picture of a God who inflicts the horrible terror of ruthless warfare on this world. What does this imply for the message of the church today?
4. Can we recognize what we read in the verses 20 and 21, as something that is happening in our society today? Should this stop us from reaching out in our society with the gospel of Jesus Christ? Why or why not?

Chapter 16 – Revelation 10

1. What is the purpose of the interlude in Revelation 10 and 11, between the blowing of the 6th and the 7th trumpet?
2. What is the meaning of the oath of the angel (see the verses 6-7) for us? Think of expressions like: *there will be no more delay*, and: *at the 7th trumpet call the mystery of God will be fulfilled*.
3. What does the symbolism of eating the scroll, as John is told to do in verse 9, mean for us? Read also Ezekiel 2:1 – 3:11.
4. Eating the scroll (verses 9 and 10) comes with the message that it will taste as sweet as honey, but that it will make John's stomach bitter. What does that tell us about the sweet and bitter things we will experience when the church will faithfully reach out into this world with the message of salvation by grace alone, the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Chapter 17 – Revelation 11:1-14

1. Read Zechariah 4. Why was this an encouraging vision for Israel after the exile? And how does it help us to see the encouragement for the church today in the vision of the two witnesses in Revelation 11?
2. In what way do the two witnesses resemble Moses and Elijah (see the verses 5 and 6)? Where else in the New Testament are these

names mentioned? Why are these names significant for the future of the church?

3. Read Revelation 11:13. In what way is this verse encouraging for the believers not to give up doing what.....?
4. The Christian church is a community of 'witnesses'. What does it mean to be a 'witness'? What is characteristic for 'witnessing' in the New Testament?

Chapter 18 – Revelation 11:15-19

1. In verse 18 we read about the effect of the fact that God Almighty, with the Glorified Christ, rules as King, and that the time has come for rewards and for judgments. How does (or how should) this affect your life today?
2. Is fact that Almighty God governs the whole world and everything that happens, including the things that are going on in our lives, comforting for you, or encouraging, or unsettling, or scary, or upsetting? Discuss God's sovereignty.
3. As Christians we have a deep desire for others to be saved by turning to Jesus Christ. At the same time there is also a strong longing for justice, for evil to be punished. How does the Book of Revelation help us to hold on to both?
4. When we reach out to people outside the church, do we make it clear that the Christian message is not only the good and happy news of salvation, but do we also share that it includes that the judgment of unrepentant wicked and evildoers is unavoidable?

Chapter 19 – Revelation 12

1. After Jesus' ascension into heaven (verse 5b) and the war mentioned in v. 7 and 8, it says in verse 8 that *there was no longer any place for them* [meaning: Satan and his angels] *in heaven*. Can you find indications in the Old Testament that this was still the case before this moment?
2. How do believers become conquerors of the power of Satan, as mentioned in verse 11? Look at the three ways given, and discuss how we can apply these in our lives as Christians.