

THE LAST WARNING

by Ray C. Stedman

Recently I enjoyed seeing the stage production of "Les Miserables" in San Francisco. I had read Victor Hugo's novel in a somewhat torturous experience of French when I was in college, but I did not remember anything but the main plot. The most memorable thing I learned was that the French do not care what you do as long as you pronounce it properly! But when I saw the play it all came to life. The characters took on real flesh and blood. We were transported back to the stirring days following the French Revolution as the vivid staging of the play recaptured many colorful scenes from that novel.

You may experience something of the same as we come to Revelation 11. Amidst the terrible judgments that are being poured out, the seals that are being opened, the trumpets that are blasting, we now turn to a more intimate scene. We zoom in, as it were, on certain personalities and characters on the stage of the last days which appear in flesh and blood. We learn more about how the program of God is going to be advanced and through whom it will be carried out.

As we have already seen, Chapter 11 is part of the interlude or intermission between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets. The Apostle John is given a new assignment at this point. Last week we saw that, at the close of Chapter 10, he was given a little scroll of prophecy to eat. John ate the scroll, and that act of eating symbolized his becoming personally involved with God's program of restoration in the last days. From this point on in Revelation John is no longer a mere observer; now he must become part of the action.

So, in Verses 1-3 of Chapter 11, John says:

I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count [or measure] the worshipers there. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles [or, as it is sometimes translated, "nations"]. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months." {Rev 11:1-3 NIV}

The act of measuring a certain area is clearly a symbolic action. In the prophecies of Ezekiel and Zechariah, and even later on in Revelation, there are instances of measuring that occur. It is, of course, a sign of God's ownership. He is claiming the measured object as his to use, either for blessing or for judgment. That is the way we use measurement today. If you have a dispute with your neighbor over a property line, what do you do? You hire a surveyor who measures the property and establishes the boundaries. So here God has given the prophet a measuring rod with which he measures the temple and the altar, and even the worshipers who come there. But he is told to exclude the outer court of the temple.

It is clear that this is an earthly temple. Previously in the book we have seen a temple opened in heaven. There is a temple in heaven, the same temple that Moses saw when he was on Mount Sinai and was told to make an exact copy of that temple in building the tabernacle. But even the heavenly temple is symbolic for it pictures the true dwelling-place of God. At the end of this book we are going to see unmistakable evidence that the dwelling-place of God is man! We believers are the temple of God. Paul says so in his First Corinthian letter: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you?" {cf, 1 Cor 6:19 NIV}. We become the ultimate dwelling-place of God in his universe. That heavenly temple symbolizes the enormous dignity that God has conferred upon our race that we should be ultimately and for all time his dwelling-place.

But that temple in heaven, symbolic as it is of our humanity, is also pictured in the physical temple on earth. It is clear from the mention of "the holy city" here that this is a temple in Jerusalem. At the present moment there is no temple in Jerusalem. The last temple was destroyed when General Titus, the son of the Emperor Vespasian, came in 70 A. D. and surrounded the city with Roman armies, subjecting it to terrible cruelty. The siege was so severe that the people of the city ate their own children in order to survive. At last the Romans

broke through the defenses of the Jews and completely demolished the temple. There has never been a temple there since. At the moment there are two buildings on that mountain top (Mt. Moriah). One is the Islamic Al-Aksa mosque, and the other, the most prominently visible building, is called the Dome of the Rock. It is the building with the golden dome and the bright blue sides that is the center of interest in almost all pictures of Jerusalem.

These buildings constitute a problem to the rebuilding of the temple. Since 1967, when the Jews recaptured the old city of Jerusalem, the Muslims have been allowed complete control of the worship on the Temple Mount. Neither Jews nor Christians are permitted to worship there now, only Muslims. A couple of years ago, in company with a Jewish friend, I went up on the temple mount and we tried to read the Bible and pray. Immediately we were spotted by Islamic guards who refused to let us continue because the Temple Mount is given over to the Muslims by the Jewish authorities. Islam regards it as the third most sacred site of their faith. Thus it becomes a real obstacle to any effort to construct a temple again on that site.

As a matter of fact, most of the Jews that we have known in the Holy Land (and many Jews everywhere in the world today) consider it necessary to destroy somehow the Dome of the Rock in order to rebuild the Jewish temple on that site. But in the last 10 years a godly Jewish engineer (and a personal friend of some here), Asher Kauffman, has done exhaustive work in locating exactly where the ancient temple was built. He has discovered and proved to the satisfaction of a great many people that the temple was not built on the spot where the Dome of the Rock stands, but it actually was built just north of the Dome, in what is still an open, uncovered area, occupied only by a small shrine called the "Dome of the Spirits." If he is right, and there is a great deal of evidence that confirms that he is, it means that it would be possible for the Jewish temple to be rebuilt on Mount Moriah without destroying the Dome of the Rock.

I mention this because it is relevant to the passage before us. If the temple is built north of the Dome again, the outer court of it would include the Dome of the Rock. Some commentators on Revelation are suggesting that Verse 2, where John is told to exclude the outer court because it has been given to the Gentiles (or the nations) for 42 months, is a reference to that area where the Dome of the Rock stands. I do not dogmatically assert that is the case, but it is very suggestive. At any rate, according to this passage, there will be some non-Jewish control allowed of part of the temple mount for 42 months.

Now 42 months is 3-1/2 years which, as most of you mathematicians will quickly recognize, is one-half of seven years. Of course, 3-1/2 years leaves two periods possible. Which half is this: the first half of the last week or the last half? From the statements given here in this text, I suggest that it is probably the first half of the week, for that would allow for the construction of a restored Jewish temple on the top of Mount Moriah. The fascinating thing is that there are several Jewish organizations in the Holy Land who are dedicated to an almost fanatical degree to reconstructing the temple on Mount Moriah. I have met them, talked with them, visited some of the preparations they have made for this event, and I personally know this to be true.

They are, for instance, training a great host of young men to be priests in that temple. They are teaching them the ancient rituals and are preparing priestly garments for them to wear. I have seen some of these garments with my own eyes. They are getting ready, in other words, to put a functioning temple back on the holy mount. Whether it will be done before the church is caught away in the "rapture" I do not know. It does not have to be done before that event, but also it may be rebuilt before that time. But this is why the eyes of the world are constantly focused upon the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. These two verses mark the fact that God himself is focusing upon that. He measures the temple and its altar. He says by that, "This is Mine. I intend to use it." It is a sign of his ownership in those last days.

From Verse 3 through Verse 14 of this chapter we zoom in for a close view of two important personages who move in from the wings almost totally unannounced: The great Angel says,

"I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." 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. {Rev 11:3-6 NIV}

In one of Paul's great messages, recorded in the book of Acts, he makes the statement that God never leaves himself without a witness. Here, in the midst of the greatest time of apostasy that the world has ever seen, God still preserves a witness. It is manifest in the form of two individuals, two men, dressed in sackcloth (burlap, for you Baby Boomers). It was the traditional garb of a prophet when he was sent to declare some threatened judgment. These two individuals appear dressed in sackcloth because their ministry is to strip away the delusions, lies, and humanistic propaganda masquerading as the truth, which come from the Man of Sin in that day.

Jesus spoke of this temple and the Man of Sin, too. He said that the sign of the last days would be "when you see the abomination that causes desolation" {Matt 24:15, Mark 13:14} standing in the holy place. The holy place is the temple, and the abomination of desolation, which Daniel had predicted, is a description of the ministry and person of the Man of Sin, the antichrist. Paul tells us in his Second Thessalonian letter that "he will sit in the temple, magnifying himself as God," {cf, 2 Th 2:4}. So the Lord Jesus and the apostle agree that a temple will be built on Mount Moriah, and will be occupied by the one whom John calls "the antichrist" (1 John 2:18). We shall meet him again when we come to Chapter 13 for he is the beast that rises from the earth, as recorded in that chapter.

All of this is set against the dramatic background of the Man of Sin ensconced in the temple, claiming the worship of the earth for himself because, as representative man, he is really God. It is humanism raised to an infinite degree -- man is his own god. We hear a great deal of that today, but then it will be universally applauded. These two witnesses are allowed to witness for 1,260 days, i.e., 42 months, or 3-1/2 years -- half of the seven-year period. If the 42 months that the nations trample down the holy city is the first half of that period, as I think it is, then the change to 1,260 days as a time-designation here probably indicates that the witness of these two men is during the last half of the week, or throughout the great tribulation. The Lord Jesus told us that there is coming a time of trouble "such as has never been on earth before," {cf, Matt 24:21}. Even the Nazi Holocaust cannot compare to it. That will be the last 3-1/2 year period of this seven-year section. So, as these two witnesses come onto the stage, we are at the beginning of the great tribulation.

There are clues given to us now as to their identity:

First, we are told they are "two olive trees and two lampstands which stand before the Lord of the earth." It is easy to recognize the meaning of those symbols because Zechariah uses them as well. In Chapter 4 of his prophecy, we read of two olive trees that drip their oil into two lampstands as a witness to Israel in the prophet's day. In connection with that witness occurs the famous oft-quoted passage, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit saith the Lord," {Zech 4:6}. So here we have two men who symbolically are like lampstands giving light in the midst of the darkness of earth. They are fed by the Spirit of God himself, for olive oil stands for the Spirit; thus their witness cannot be extinguished. They cannot be eliminated until their work is done. They are especially protected by God for fire comes out of their mouths to destroy anyone who tries to harm them. They are human flame-throwers!

That is strongly suggestive of the ministry of Elijah the prophet. In the book of Second Samuel we are told on two different occasions concerning the ministry of Elijah that the king sent a company of fifty soldiers to take him captive. Each time fire came down from heaven and destroyed them. This suggests therefore that one of these witnesses is Elijah, returned to earth. The book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, predicts that very thing. Malachi says, "See, I will send the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes," {Mal 4:5 NIV}. In the gospel of Matthew, at the account of the transfiguration of Jesus, as Peter, James and John came down the mountain after seeing Moses and Elijah there with the Lord, the disciples asked Jesus, "Why do the teachers say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus said in reply, "To be sure, Elijah will come and restore all things" (Matt. 17:11), but he explained that in a sense Elijah had already come, for John the Baptist had anticipated that prediction by his ministry in the spirit and power of Elijah. That does not mean, of course, that Elijah will not yet come. He will come, as the Lord Jesus indicated clearly. So it seems certain that Elijah is one of these two witnesses.

Who is the other? There are yet more clues. These men were given power, first, to suspend all rain upon the earth. That again reminds us of Elijah who had authority from God to withhold the annual rainfall. For 3-1/2 years it did not rain in Israel until he prayed and asked God to restore rain again. The two witnesses also had power to turn the waters into blood, and to bring plagues and diseases among the people. That looks back to the ministry of Moses. When Pharaoh resisted Moses' appeal to let the people of God go, Moses turned the waters into blood and called plagues down upon the Egyptians. That is why many expositors see these two witnesses as Moses and Elijah appearing again. Some say it is Enoch and Elijah, because those are the two men of the Old Testament who never died; they were caught up into heaven without death. In some of the earliest Christian writings there is reference to Enoch and Elijah as the two witnesses. It is not definitely certain, therefore, that it is Moses here, but for me the matter is settled when I remember that it was Moses and Elijah who appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus. Peter tells us that was a picture of the coming again of Jesus. So now that we are considering here the coming of the Lord it seems most likely that it is Moses and Elijah who are the two witnesses.

We learn more details of their ministry in Verses 7-10:

Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. 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. {Rev 11:7-10 NIV}

Notice the words, "when they have finished their testimony." No one can interfere until their work is done. But then "the beast from the Abyss" attacks them. That phrase "beast from the Abyss" takes us back to Chapter 9, Verse 11. There we saw the star that fell from heaven who was given a key to open the Abyss and out of it came terrible symbolic locusts. Their king, we are told, was from the Abyss. His name was Abaddon, which means "destruction," and Apollyon, which means "destroyer." It was evident, as we saw then, that this was Satan himself, the king over all the demons.

The Man of Sin, the Apostle Paul tells us, will be possessed of Satan. Just as Satan entered into Judas before his betrayal of the Lord, so Satan possesses the antichrist, this Man of Sin, whom we will learn much more of in this book. It is he who attacks these two witnesses and puts them to death. They have been a constant thorn in his side. They kept telling the truth to the people, pointing out to them what the actual program of God would be. They kept warning them that they were being deceived by the lies that were widespread in that day. This must have angered and enraged this artful propagandist who had all the world under his control except for those who believed the two witnesses. But now at last he is allowed to kill them.

Remarkably, that is the cause of a great celebration on earth. Even today when non-believers accomplish something that delights them they say, "Let's party!" Partying is the only way they know to celebrate -- and a great celebration breaks out in Jerusalem at that time. They refuse to bury these two men but gloat over their death and display their bodies for all the world to see. This seems to foresee the technology of television, for every nation, tribe, language and people gaze upon the dead bodies of these two witnesses. The city is here called "Sodom and Egypt;" Sodom, because of its corruption, and Egypt, because of its persecution. Yet it is clearly identified as the city "where the Lord was crucified." It is ironic that the hatred of the world against the cause of Christ reveals itself in a great party where people actually give gifts to each other, as at Christmas, in celebration of the deaths of these two witnesses who had been such a painful rebuke to their sinful practices.

But God always has the last word, and in Verses 11-14 we learn what that is:

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. 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.

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.

The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon. {Rev 11:11-14 NIV}

Like their Lord before them, these two witnesses are privileged to pass through the same experience that he went through, in the same place -- the city of Jerusalem. They are cruelly killed, as he was killed, and are resurrected 3-1/2 days later, and ascend into heaven before the eyes of this startled crowd. Terror shivers through them as they watch. Twice we are told of the shaken fear they experienced. They feel the chill of their own defeat in what they see. Who can oppose a God of resurrection power? The worst anyone can do, Jesus said, is to put you to death, but after that, he declared, there is nothing more they can do. Not even death can hinder the carrying out of God's program!

The wonderful truth taught us here is that this is the destiny of everyone who believes in Jesus. We shall all die, except those that are caught up at the end, and even they are changed in the twinkling of an eye. If we die we shall be resurrected, and shall ascend into heaven to be with the Lord forever. So this is also the destiny of the two faithful witnesses. We need not be surprised that God takes care of his own this way, for he does this for all those who trust in Christ. It is also not surprising that "these who live on the earth" should feel terror when this happens. Who can defeat a God of resurrection? It brings to mind John Donne's splendid words:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and Dreadful, for thou art not so.
For those whom thou dost think to overthrow,
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me!

The hope of believers throughout the ages is that death cannot claim us finally. It must itself feel its own death in the lake of fire to come.

That brings us again to the end of man's last rule on earth. A massive earthquake immediately strikes, just as it did at the crucifixion of Jesus and still again at his resurrection. It is centered now on Jerusalem. A tenth of the city collapses, and 7000 people die. There are other passages in the prophets that predict this same formidable earthquake. In Zechariah 14, the prophet announces that the Messiah will stand upon the Mount of Olives and when his feet touch the mountain it will separate in half. Half will move to the north and half to the south to create a great valley between. One can easily imagine what a massive earthquake like that would do to modern Jerusalem, with its population of almost a million people.

There is little doubt that this is literal since the largest earthquake fault on earth runs just east of Jerusalem, down the valley of the Jordan River. It is called the "Great Rift Valley," and it extends under the Dead Sea into Africa. It is the valley where the great African lakes, Lake Victoria, Lake Nyansa, and others are found. It is the line where the African continent butts up against Asia. We are familiar these days with the theory of continental drift and the movement of tectonic plates upon which the continents rest, so it is quite understandable that this would take place exactly as described.

Immediately, the seventh angel sounds his trumpet. It brings us to the end of the trumpet series which is also the same end to which the seals and bowls bring us. Let us see what happens:

The seventh angel sounded 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."

And 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, {Rev 11:15-17a NIV}

Notice the NIV properly omits the usual third phrase "and who is to come" Why? Because he has already come at this point!

**"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."**

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumbling, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm. {Rev 11:17b-19 NIV}

We have seen these sights and sounds twice before. They mark the end of the tribulation period and the beginning of the millennium. These angelic voices proclaim the beginning of the reign of Christ on earth. They worship him because he has taken his great power and begun to reign, first, upon the earth for a period of a thousand years, as Chapter 20 of this book will tell us plainly. Then there will follow a brief rebellion, and then begins the new heavens and the new earth where Jesus continues his reign forever and ever, as this passage declares.

Verse 18 is a condensed review of the tribulation and the whole millennial period. It begins with the anger and rebellion of the nations: "The nations were angry and your wrath has come." That looks back to Daniel's 70th week. Psalm 2 describes the same events.

**Why do the nations rage and the peoples imagine a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves
and their leaders take counsel
together against the Lord
and against his Anointed,
saying, "Let us break their chains asunder
and cast their bonds off from us." {cf, Psa 2:1-3 KJV}**

That describes the great rebellion of the last days. How will God answer? "The day of his wrath has come," but it is also the day of judging the dead and rewarding his servants and the saints, both small and great, who honor the Lord. We learn from other Scriptures that the dead are raised at the beginning of the tribulation period. Paul describes it in First Thessalonians Chapter 4: the rapture of the church. Then at the end of the thousand-year reign of the millennium, there is another raising of the dead -- the wicked dead who stand before the great white throne judgment. We will come to that later in the book.

Throughout this whole period the servants of God are being rewarded. Here is where we must insert the picture of Matthew 25, where Jesus says, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory he will sit on his throne and all the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the sheep from the goats," {Matt 25:31-32 NIV}. He is judging the professed believers of that time, those who claim to be Christians. Remember the basis of his judgment? It is how people react to the helpless, the hopeless and the homeless. "Did you feed them?" he will ask. "Did you give them to drink? Did you take them in? Did you clothe them? Did you visit them when they were in prison? Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me," {cf, Matt 25:33-46}. It is at the beginning of the millennium that this great judgment occurs.

Finally, we are told that God's temple in heaven is opened and the ark of the covenant is seen there. Don't look around for Indiana Jones! He was looking for the copy of this ark, but the true ark of the covenant is safely there in heaven as a guarantee that God has not forgotten his people Israel. The ark of the covenant always relates to that nation, so Chapters 12-14 will bring Israel again before us. For the third time we shall retrace these last 3-1/2 years of the tribulation until we come again to the lightnings, the rumblings, the peals of thunder, the great earthquake and hailstorm when the seven bowls of wrath are poured out in Chapters 15-16.

What a privilege God has given us to be able to read the last chapters of the history of the earth! You can read ahead and see where it is all going to end. The time is coming, this book teaches us, when Jesus shall reign

over all the earth. Righteousness shall be the characteristic of the times, not unrighteousness as now. In that day:

- All drug traffic will cease,
- All abortion mills will be closed
- Divorce will be unheard of
- Families will live together in beauty, peace and harmony,
- Wars will cease throughout the earth,
- Crime statistics will drop to zero,
- Sex scandals will never be known,
- Truth shall be taught again in the schools, and
- Many politicians and lawyers will have to find honest work!

In the beautiful words of Scripture: "Righteousness will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea!" {cf, Isa 11:9, Hab 2:14}. Let us not lose hope, but encourage one another with the certainty of the glory to come.

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