

Revelation as Trilogy
The Two Powers
Chapter 11: The Two Witnesses

Introduction: It has been often said that God is the God of second chances, meaning that God's desire is always repentance and new life. This understanding of God is at the heart of this chapter. Even amid the ever-expanding chaos, God reaches out to get humanity to return to the way of life and away from the way of death. God works to protect those who have been sealed in God and in the Lamb, yet there will still be some who lose their way and perhaps their lives. The good news contained in this chapter is two-fold. First some who were lost will turn and praise God, meaning all is not lost for those who are not yet part of God's people. Second God has started moving toward the restoration of the world.

The Story: The measuring staff harkens back to Ezekiel 40:3-48:35 when the prophet, in a vision, watches an angel measure the not yet rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. The vision is a promise that even though the people of God are in exile in Babylon, God will bring them home, protect them, and allow them to rebuild the Temple, which is the dwelling place of God. In the same way, the rebuilt Second Temple has been destroyed by the Romans. This time the Temple being measured is not going to be a building but a people, the people of God in Jesus. The followers of Jesus are in the inner court, which is measured to protect them. The outer court, which had been in the other Temples, the court of the Gentiles, is not to be measured because it is filled with those who will follow the Unholy God (whom we will shortly meet) and who desire to destroy God's people. The period of destruction/persecution corresponds to the time (three and half years) when Antiochus IV Epiphanes (a former Greek ruler of the Jews) desecrated the Second Temple.

At this point we meet the "two witnesses." There is an entire library given over to discussing the identity of these two witnesses. They have been described as historical characters come back to life (Moses, Elijah, Enoch), groups of people (Christians and Jews, martyrs and saints, Jewish believers and gentile believers) or two principles (law and prophets). Likely they represent all who will have the faith to prophesy in the face of danger because their power comes from their mouths, and not from weapons. The number two is necessary because it takes two witnesses to testify to the truth of any belief.

We now meet the beast. The beast has also been associated with everything from historical figures to empires to Satan himself. The beast kills the two witnesses and people celebrate their death because of the pain the witnesses had brought upon those who refused to follow God. Even so, God will resurrect the witnesses which will terrify humanity. And just as there was an earthquake at Jesus' resurrection, so there will be one following the witnesses' resurrection...only this time there is great destruction.

At the sounding of the seventh trumpet the scene shifts back to heaven. We hear voices praising God and proclaiming that God has now begun the reclamation of creation and that there will be a judgment of all persons with some being rewarded and others receiving wrath. Please note that God will destroy the destroyers of the earth. Finally, heaven is opened, and the ark of the covenant is revealed.

Reflection: As was mentioned in the introduction, God's desire is to redeem all of creation, which makes sense because this is the theme of all Johannine literature, including John 3:16. What is also true of Johannine literature is that people are free to accept or reject this love, with Nikodemus being the archetype of a believer. This means that the role of both the two witnesses and the praises from heaven are intended to encourage people to examine their lives and chose the way of life in Jesus, rather than the way of death in the beast.

Questions:

1. How do you respond to the image of insiders and outsiders in relationship to God?
2. Who played the role of "witness" in your life, helping you know what God desires of you?
3. Why do people celebrate when good is overthrown by evil?