The Prophesying of Two Witnesses
Revelation 11:3–14

As we begin our study in Revelation 11, we find ourselves in an interlude before the sounding of the seventh trumpet; the sixth trumpet has sounded; the seventh and final trumpet will soon be sounding; it appears to sound throughout the second half of the Tribulation; this final trumpet will introduce us to seven angels who hold in their hands seven bowls of wrath which they will pour out on the earth; the worst of the Tribulation is yet to come.

In this interlude we find ourselves in the city of Jerusalem and it is the middle of the Tribulation; three and one half years have passed with another three and a half years to go before the Lord returns with His Church in all His glory and power.

By this time the Tribulation temple has been completed on Temple Mount; most likely it has already been desecrated by the Antichrist who will stand in the holy place and declare himself to be god (2 Thessalonians 2:3–4).

The events we are going to cover in this section of Revelation concern two witnesses sent from God to prophesy for twelve hundred and sixty days before they are killed in the streets of Jerusalem; they will lie in the street of the city for three and one half days before the breath of God enters them and they ascend into heaven; the ministry of the two witnesses goes a long way in bringing the Jews to salvation and acknowledging Jesus as their Messiah.

The Message of Two Witnesses (11:3)

They will prophesy 1260 days... “And I will give power to My two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth” (11:3); 1260 days by a Jewish calendar is 3½ years, or one half the Tribulation period; the question is, which half? Some Bible teachers, like John MacArthur, teach it be the second half while Jerusalem is being trampled by the
Antichrist; others, like Doc Beshore, Dr. David Hocking, Dr. David Reagan and many others believe as I do that they prophecy during the first half of the Tribulation; they might have had a large part to do in converting the 144,000 Jewish evangelists, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes (Revelation 7).

The 3½ years has an historical significance; it was in June 168 BC when Antiochus Epiphanes, King of Syria, desecrated the temple in Jerusalem by offering pigs on the brazen altar and placing a statue of Zeus Olympus in the holy place of the temple; the temple chambers were made brothels where sacred prostitution took place; he was met with stubborn resistance and many Jews were killed seeking to defend the temple and their faith.

These dreadful acts by Antiochus were finally halted by the rising of the gallant and heroic Judas Maccabaeus and his men; this terrible period when the temple was desecrated lasted from June 168 BC to December 165 BC, or about 3½ years; during the Tribulation, the Antichrist will desecrate the temple by standing in it and declare himself to be god; this will happen in the middle of the Tribulation (Daniel 9:27); the temple will remain desecrated throughout the second half of the Tribulation, or 3½ years; this figure of 3½ years symbolically represents the period of time the temple was desecrated under Antiochus Epiphanes and will be desecrated under the Antichrist; this is why Antiochus becomes a type of Antichrist.

*They will preach with authority...* The Lord says, “I will give power to My two witnesses;” that is, they are given authority by God to witness; the word “witness” (martusin) gives us our English word for “martyr;” a witness becomes synonymous with dying; if you are going to be a true witness for Christ you had better be prepared to die for Christ; as we will learn late, these two witnesses will suffer martyrdom at the hands of the Antichrist.

Why two witnesses? According to the Mosaic Law, two was the number necessary to confirm any testimony (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15); these two men will confirm the word of the other as truth from God; even the NT uses the same standard for confirmation (Matthew 18:16; John 8:17; Hebrews 10:28).

*They will prophesy about repentance and about warnings of judgments to come...* They will prophesy “clothed in sackcloth” (11:3b); the word “prophecy” has a two-fold meaning; it is the word (prophemi) meaning “to speak before;” it can mean to speak before an event as in prophesying the future; or it can mean to speak before an audience as in preaching before a congregation; a prophet
therefore is one who can foretell the future as well as forthtell the Word of God; the most common usage of the word in the NT is to forthtell the Word—to preach or teach God’s message to others.

It seems obvious that their message will deal with the need to repent and turn to God or face His judgment; this is seen in the clothing they are wearing; sackcloth is as primitive a garment as you can imagine; it is rough, course and heavy; people would carry potatoes in a sackcloth; in ancient times it was uniquely worn by prophets (see Isaiah 22:12; Jeremiah 6:26); when the prophets wore such a garment they were prophesying judgment; they took a posture of mourning; it was a sad posture; when people wanted to repent they would clothe themselves in sackcloth and put ashes on their head; that is what truly repentant Jews would do (see Matthew 11:21; Luke 10:13).

The Meaning of the Two Witnesses (11:4–6)

*Their preparation for ministry*... “These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth” (11:4); one description of these two witnesses is that of an olive tree and a lampstand; this has an OT background as seen in a vision given to the prophet Zechariah.

The prophet Zechariah’s ministry focused on the rebuilding of the temple; once the Jews were permitted to return to their homeland of Israel following their captivity in Babylon, they had the task under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Judah’s governor, and Joshua, the high priest to get God’s temple reconstructed; it had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC.

In a vision, Zechariah sees an angel awakening him out of a sleep; he was asked what he saw; Zechariah replied that he saw a lampstand of solid gold with a bowl suspended over the lampstand; the lampstand had seven lamps and there were seven pipes connected to the bowl; then he saw two olive trees, one to the right of the bowl and one to its left; olive oil is flowing from the two olive trees into the bowl which transported oil by gravity to the seven pipes connected to the seven tiers of the lampstand; the seven tiers of the lampstand are lit with fire because they are being fed the oil they need.

Zechariah is curious as to its meaning; there had been much delay in getting the temple rebuilt; not only was there opposition from people living in the land at the time, but there was not a real commitment on the part of the Jews to get the job
done; they were more interested in paneling their own homes than finishing the temple of God (Haggai 1:4); this vision given to Zechariah was to assure him that the temple would be built and God will to see to it; He says to Zechariah, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord’” (Zechariah 4:6).

Then Zechariah learns that the “two branches that drip into the receptacles from which the golden oil drains” are “the two anointed ones, who stand beside the LORD of the whole earth” (Zechariah 4:11–14); that is, through the anointed ministries of Zerubbabel and Joshua the temple will be completed; the oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit that was flowing through those two men to accomplish God’s will (Zechariah 4).

Getting back to Revelation 11 and the two witnesses, they are identified as two olive trees and two lampstands; they represent two Spirit-filled men: one a ruler like Zerubbabel and one a priest or prophet like Joshua; they will accomplish their mission of prophesying to Israel for 3½ years even amidst great opposition; their power and success will come not from their own strength and might, but from the Holy Spirit.

*Their power to perform their ministry*... “And if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies. And if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner. They have power to shut heaven, so that no rain falls in the days of their prophecy; and they have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to strike the earth with all plagues, as often as they desire” (11:5–6).

*Their personhood for identity*... Who are these two witnesses? Some believe them to be Elijah and Enoch because these are the only two men raptured into heaven having never died; furthermore, they are representatives of all mankind, for Elijah prophesied to the Jews whereas Enoch prophesied to the Gentiles.

The most common understanding is that the two witnesses are Moses and Elijah; it was Elijah who had the power to shut up the heavens for three and one half years during the reign of King Ahab and bring a drought to the land because of the idolatry of Israel (1 Kings 17–18); he also called fire from heaven during the reign of King Ahaziah, which consumed 50 men who were worshippers of Baal (2 Kings 1:10–12); it was Moses who had the power to turn water to blood and strike Egypt with plagues (Exodus 7:19–12:1–51); furthermore, Moses represents the Law and Elijah the prophets.
It was also Moses and Elijah that appeared with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–3); based on these reasons we believe the two witnesses are Moses and Elijah.

_Their protection for completing their ministry..._ “If anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner...” (11:5b); in what manner? Either by fire, or drought, or plagues as these were the powers given to the two witnesses; as far as drought, it says “and no rain falls in the days of their prophecy” (11:6b); this seems to tell us that during the first three and one-half years of the Tribulation it will not rain; that was the length of time that Elijah shut off the heavens and it did not rain in Israel (1 Kings 17-18); God is protecting and empowering these two witnesses until their ministry is completed.

**The Method by Which They are Killed (11:7–10)**

_The person who murders the two witnesses..._ “When they finish their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, overcome them and kill them” (11:7); at the midpoint of the Tribulation—at the three and one half year mark—their ministry is completed and they are murdered by the Antichrist who is described as ascending out of the bottomless pit; this is where the demonic locusts were bound (Revelation 9:1–11); the bottomless pit most likely describes the association of the Antichrist with the demonic realm; he is Satan in human form, or Satan possessed.

When they finish their testimony is when their ministry ends; up until that time they are immortal; they are death defying and they are deadly up until their ministry is fulfilled

_The place where it happens..._ “And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified” (11:8); the murder of the two witnesses happens in the streets of Jerusalem which is referred to as Sodom and Egypt; during the Tribulation period the city of Jerusalem will be so wicked and immoral it is compared with Sodom and Egypt; Sodom was known for its practice of homosexuality and immorality (Genesis 19; Isaiah 1:9–10;3:8–9; Jeremiah 23:14); Egypt was known for its spiritual bondage and idolatry (Ezekiel 23:3, 4, 8, 19).

How sad that Jerusalem, the city of God, has become so immoral that God associates it with a city like Sodom and a nation like Egypt; furthermore, it is sad
that it is in God’s city where the two witnesses are murdered; also called the place where their Lord was crucified.

*The publicity they receive...* “Then those from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations will see their dead bodies three and a half days, and not allow their dead bodies to be put in the graves” (11:9); The whole world is witness to their dead bodies lying in the streets of Jerusalem; how can that be? TV cameras will be pointed at them and a signal will go up to a satellite which will beam that signal to people’s television sets all over the world; what could not be understood in John’s day can be understood in our time; that is why Daniel tells us that some prophecy is sealed up until the end of time (Daniel 12:9); the closer we get to the Lord’s return the more we can understand prophecy; so ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox and all the networks will be focused on the deaths of these two witnesses.

*The purpose behind the celebration of their deaths...* “And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another, because the two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth” (11:10); this is the only celebration to take place during the Tribulation; why is everyone so happy? For some they feared for their lives; anyone who tried to harm the witnesses was miraculously struck dead; no one knew how to apprehend them; furthermore, their message was not only convicting, but quite troubling; convicting in that no one wants to be reminded of their sins and their need to repent; troubling in that they may well have been prophesying the judgments of God that will fall on the earth over the last 3½ years of the Tribulation; no one wants to hear bad news, and truly when the seventh trumpet sounds the news will not be good.

**The Marvel of their Resurrection (11:11–12)**

*In terms of the power of the Holy Spirit...* “Now after three and a half days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them” (11:11); can’t you image the fear of seeing two dead people who had been dead for 3½ days suddenly rise to their feet; that would scare the pants off anyone; I must make a confession, when I first entered the ministry and pastored my first church at 24 years of age, the thing that concerned me the most was doing someone’s funeral; I had never done one before; I can’t even say I attended one in many years, so I had no idea what to expect; worse than that, I had these nightmares of the corpse waking up during the eulogy; well I finally had my first funeral, a 90-something year old widowed saint named Jesse Steel; it was a delight to do her service; and what also was so good about it, she
stayed in the coffin; today, I must admit that I really get a blessing out of doing funerals for godly people because you have a great message of hope to share; in Revelation 14:13 we read: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord…” and as Paul said: “To be absent from the body is to be home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

In terms of the place where they ascended… “And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Come up here.’ And they ascended to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies saw them” (11:12); those who refer to themselves as “mid-tribbers” use this text to support their case that the rapture occurs in the middle of the Tribulation; they teach the two witnesses represent the church; the two witnesses verify the truthfulness of the message the true church has taught.

Be that as it may, certainly this is a picture of the rapture of the Church; in this case, it is a two-man rapture where the two witnesses are raised to their feet and ascend to heaven in a cloud; Paul speaks of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18: “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

There are some lessons to learn:

1. Be careful not to be ignorant of the rapture… “But I do not want you to be ignorant brethren…” (v.13a); the Greek word “ignorant” (agnos) gives us our word agnostic, which in Latin means ignoramus; those who call themselves an agnostic are admitting they are an ignoramus, or utterly ignorant; it is a terrible thing to be ignorant of any great truth, but Paul is saying, one thing I do not want you to be ignorant of is, the Lord is coming back for His Church.

2. Be celebrating those who have died in Christ… Then he says, I do not want you to be ignorant of those, “who have fallen asleep;” the word “sleep” is a euphemism for death (see John 11:11,14); while we do not want to see our
loved ones die, yet their parting from us is only temporary; therefore, Paul writes, don’t “sorrow as others who have no hope” (v.13b); we live in a day, as did Paul, when pagans do not believe in life after death; they have no hope; an inscription on a pagan grave reads: “I was not, I became, I am not, I care not;” what a sad commentary on life; yet the coming of Christ for His Church is called “our blessed hope” (Titus 2:13).

3. Be certain of your faith… “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus” (v.14); if you believe that Jesus died and rose again, why would you doubt for one moment that those in Christ who die will not be raised from the dead? “Because I live, you will live also” said Jesus (John 14:19); Chuck Missler wrote: “Our hope is as certain as the death and resurrection of Christ. His resurrection is God’s seal and evidence for ours.”

4. Be committed to Christ’s coming in the air for his Church…” For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air…” (vss.15–17a); when the Lord comes for His Church He “will descend with a shout;” what will He shout? When the two witnesses stood on their feet, they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, ‘Come up here’” (Revelation 11:12); I believe those are the words that believers all over the world will hear in their native tongue, “Come up here!”

This verse clearly speaks of the rapture; the word rapture does not appear in the English Bible; it is a Latin word, raptura, that means “to seize, to snatch, to be carried away;” when Paul says that the Church will be “caught up” it is the Greek word, harpazo and means the same thing as raptura; how anyone can deny the rapture is beyond my comprehension.

Many Bible scholars have abandoned this doctrine. Why? Let me suggest a few possible reasons: 1) False prophets who teach the rapture are often date setters and they are always wrong; therefore people want to distance themselves from their teaching; 2) People who believe in the rapture are often portrayed as escapers who are out of touch with reality and ready to leave this world and all its problems behind; one of the reasons for such a
poor turnout by evangelicals during elections—except in 2016 for Trump—has been, “The Lord is coming soon, so why waste my time voting;” 3) Those in Christian education have introduced multiple ways of interpreting Scripture and consequently only 26% of those with a Master’s Degree in Theology believe in the rapture, compared to 60% of pastors who have no college degree; pastors under 45 are less likely to believe in the rapture than those older than 45; even Dr. William Craig, research professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Theology said of the 2014 reboot of the Left Behind movie: “American evangelism is very widely misled, that it has departed from the historic Christian position about the second coming of Christ. That’s really sobering, because if we are wrong about this, what other things might we have misinterpreted.” 4) the Left Behind series of Tim LaHaye has been viewed as more of a cultural phenomenon than biblical truth and Hal Lindsey’s books on the rapture have seemed too sensational to be believed.

In spite of such skepticism and teaching, Paul says the time will come when we will be “caught up to meet the Lord in the air;” those words are good enough for me!

5. Be comforted by the hope we have in Christ... “and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, comfort one another with these words” (vss. 17b–18); to me there is no greater comfort than to know that Christ will deliver His Church from the wrath that is to come and that all the loved ones of mine who have died in Christ I will see again, either at my death or in the rapture, whichever comes first! Amen!

The Maham Following a Great Earthquake (11:13)

Seen in the power of a great earthquake... “In the same hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. In the earthquake, seven thousand people were killed... (11:13a); this is the second of three great earthquakes during the Tribulation; there was a great quake connected with the opening of the sixth seal (6:12); there will be a greater one when the seventh angel is pouring out the seventh bowl of wrath on the earth (16:18–20); one of the greatest fault lines in the world runs just east of Jerusalem through the Mount of Olives and down the Jordan Valley and beneath the Red Sea into Africa; remember, when the Lord comes to the earth His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives and there will be a great earthquake that will split that Mount in two (see Zechariah 14:1–4).
Seen in the people who get saved… “... the rest were afraid and gave glory to the God of heaven. And the second woe is past. Behold the third woe is coming quickly” (11:13–14); the city that gets hit by this earthquake is Jerusalem as one tenth of the city collapses; seven thousand people die, but many of those who survive, out of fear, will give glory to God; I believe it will be in the Tribulation where the majority of Jews get saved; in this case, some get frightened into salvation; that may not be the best way to come to God, but it is certainly better than not coming at all; the very message of the 144,000 Jewish evangelists has been: “Fear God and give Him glory, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water” (14:7).

I am glad I don’t have to be scared into heaven because I have witnessed the horrific judgments of God; I am also glad I have a living hope that has been witnessed in two men whose lives were taken, but who stood on their feet and heard the risen Lord say, “Come up here!” Amen!