

This passage is about the calling of the church to proclaim the message of Jesus and enduring persecution because of that. It is also about how God protects the church and judges the enemies of the church. This message is conveyed in symbols that are rooted in earlier parts of the Bible. It's likely that just by reading through these verses most people have very little, if any, idea what they are all about. John expected his readers to have some background knowledge of the OT as well as how the OT symbols were fulfilled in the NT and he probably expected the teachers of the church to do some research and thinking and help the membership in the church to understand his message. Thankfully the teachers of the church have been doing that since the book was first written and so we have excellent commentaries to help us to understand the message of these verses without having to do all of the thinking and research on our own. And because of that unpacking the meaning of these verses is not that difficult.

I will first unpack the meaning of these verses in a quick summary – just touching the main ideas and then we will think about what this all means for us in the second half of the sermon.

So first John tells us that he was given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple of God, the altar and those who worship there.” The temple is the church. The OT temple was the place where God dwelt with his people. The fulfillment of that temple in the NT is the church where God dwells in the midst of his people. In 1 Corinthians 3:16 Paul writes to the Corinthians, “[Y]ou are God’s temple and ... God’s Spirit dwells in you.” The measuring of the temple and the altar and the people who worship there refers to God’s presence with and knowledge of his people. The ESV Study Bible says, “This “measuring of persons shows both God’s protection and his ownership and suggests that the temple itself symbolizes the saints....”

John is told “do not measure the court outside of the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty two months.” So God’s people belong to him and are protected. Those on the outside are not. Here they are called the nations. They stand for those who reject God’s claims and mercy. And they will persecute the church. They will trample the holy city which is Jerusalem which stands for the church. They will do so for forty-two months. Forty-two months stands for a significant but limited period of time. The commentators give all kind of background for that conclusion. I trust you will be satisfied, as I am, to know that there are good reasons for this conclusion without knowing what they are. That kind of study is rather tedious and for us its good enough just to have the results.

Verse 3. “And I will grant authority to my two witness, and they will prophesy for 1260 days, clothed in sackcloth.” The two witnesses stand for the church. The reason there are two is that God had said in the OT that truth was to be established by two witnesses. The two witnesses prophesy. That is the main idea of this passage. It is about the church proclaiming the word of God in the context of a hostile world. 1260 days is the same as 42 months and the meaning is the same – a significant, but limited period of time.

The witnesses are clothed in sackcloth. They are in mourning. OT people wore sackcloth when they were in mourning. The church knows ahead of time that many will not heed God’s message and there is sorrow

associated with bringing a message of salvation and judgment when so many will reject the salvation and therefore experience the judgment. The text emphasizes that the church brings God's message with authority. "I will grant authority to my two witnesses...." The church is appointed by God to bring his message to the world and so it does so with the authority of God. The proclamation of God's message by the church is a very weighty matter. It is often treated with disdain, but the reality is that God himself is speaking to the world through the church.

The passage continues to develop the picture. The two witnesses are two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. That imagery comes from the book of Zechariah and the main ideas here are that the lamps give light and that the light comes from the Holy Spirit. The olive trees provide oil for the lamps so that the lamps can give light. The oil stands for the Holy Spirit. So the church is like a light in the world and that light comes from the Holy Spirit.

The next few verses make the point that God's witnesses have the power to bring plagues upon the wicked that help to confirm the truthfulness and seriousness of God's message. Verses 5 and 6. "And if anyone would harm them [the two witnesses that symbolize the church], fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is to be doomed to be killed. They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire." These two verses allude to the ministries of Moses and Elijah who were both prophets who brought God's message to people who did not want to hear it. Both Moses and Elijah were given power to bring plagues upon those who rejected the word of God and those plagues served to reinforce the spoken word.

The church also has the power to bring plagues. We see that in the beginning of Revelation 8 where the saints pray to God and God sends all kinds of plagues upon the earth. The point of the symbolism here is that the various plagues that fall upon those who reject the word of God go along with the spoken word to confirm the message. With Moses and Elijah, the plagues and the drought went along with the prophetic word and were part of the same message. So it is with the church and the plagues that God sends upon the unrepentant as a result of the prayers of the church.

And so it is in the period between the first and second comings of Christ. When we pray for God's kingdom to come, part of the way that God answers those prayers is to send judgments upon the wicked to reinforce the message of salvation and judgment that the church brings to the world. When we, the church, warn of God's judgments upon the wicked, and pray that God will bless our message, one of the ways that he does that is by sending a pandemic or a hurricane or an earthquake or a drought. When we pray that God will cause the people of the world to listen to our message, one of the ways that God answers those prayers is by sending some kind of plague to show the world that he is serious about his warnings of judgment to encourage it to repent.

But the people who do not repent are bothered by that. They do not like to be told that Christ is Lord and that they must repent even though the message comes with an offer of salvation for those who repent and believe on Jesus. The unbelieving world resents God's message because God is calling to them to repent of their sins and they do not want to do that. And so they hate and persecute the messengers and God allows them to do that. Revelation 11:7–10, "7And when they [the two witness which stand for the church] have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, 8and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. 9For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, 10and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth."

This is about the persecution of the church. The beast which rises from the bottomless pit is the demonic power that stands behind the powers on earth that persecute the church. One commentator writes that the beast "represents 'those antichristian powers in the world which seek to silence the church's witness' resulting in the 'apparent triumph of the forces of evil.'" (Quoted in Phillips, Revelation p.323) The beast in the book of Revelation symbolizes earthly powers that are indwelt by the demonic.

The dead bodies of the two witness lie in the street. The wicked world gazes upon them and has a party and refuses to let them be buried. This emphasizes the hatred and contempt that the unrepentant world feels towards the church because of its message. Sometimes the persecuting world has literally treated the bodies of the martyrs with such contempt, but the symbolism is not always fulfilled literally. The symbolism of leaving the dead bodies on the street and rejoicing over them powerfully conveys the idea of how much the unbelieving world loathes the people of God because of God's message.

The end of verse 10 tell us why the unrepentant world has such a deep loathing for the church. "[B]ecause these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth." God's message to the world is good news for those who receive it and turn to the Lord, but it is profoundly disturbing to those who reject it. God's claims to be God of heaven and earth to whom all are accountable infuriate those who refuse to submit to God's authority. God's call to repentance is despised by those who insist on living by their own desires. God's call for all people to humble themselves before him enrages those who cling to their pride. God's insistence on sexual purity is galling for those who have thrown off all sexual restraint. God's insistence that Jesus is the only way is despised by those who believe that there is no one overarching truth and that everyone can have their own truth.

And for the church to continue to proclaim that message is a torment those who dwell on the earth. Persecution comes from a very deep place. The message of God to the world cuts deeply. Those who submit

to it are healed. Those who refuse it are tormented by it and the hatred comes from the very core of their being.

So the dead bodies of the martyred saints lay on the street while those who dwell on the earth celebrate and party. But then the two witness rise from the dead. “Verse 11 “But after three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them.” Verse 12, “Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here! And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them.”

Three and a half days is a short period of time. The martyred saints rise from the dead and ascend into heaven. This refers to the final resurrection. The martyred saints will rise from the dead and ascend into heaven. They will be vindicated before the world. And at the same time God final judgment will fall upon the wicked. “At that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.” Whatever this refers to exactly, it is clear that the enemies of God will not win – they will face terror at the end and will end up giving glory to God. “[A]t the name of Jesus every knee shall bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.” (Philippians 2:10).

So we have the picture painted by these verses. We just skimmed over them so that we can understand the symbolism and how it applies to the church. It is possible to go through these verses phrase by phrase to understand the details more thoroughly, but we do not need that amount of detail to get the main message of the passage which is not that complicated or difficult to understand. God protects his church. The church is God’s witness on earth and is called to bring God’s message to the world. This passage focuses on that part of the world that rejects God’s message. The confrontation between the church and the world is a violent confrontation. The church by its prayers calls down God’s judgments upon the world to reinforce the message in a way that is similar to what Elijah and Moses did. The world responds to the hated message by trying to snuff it out. It makes war on the church. The witnesses are killed and the world celebrates. But in the end the church rises from the dead, ascends into heaven and the world is forced to recognize the truth of the message, but then it is too late and the final judgments are falling.

Now when we apply this symbolic story to us today, we must understand that the killing of the two witnesses and all the talk about their dead bodies does not mean that every single member of the church is killed for their faith. This is a symbol for persecution and persecution ranges from insults to torture and death. Jesus said, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” There never was a time either in the Bible or beyond when all Christians were murdered for their faith. There has always been a range in different places and different periods of history. The Bible does seem to indicate that it will get worse as we approach the end. And while we do not experience the worst

persecution in our part of the world, there is an awful lot of persecution in the world right now and many people are dying for their faith.

So what are we to do with a passage like this? First of all it shows that God's protection does not mean that we will not be killed for our witness. The whole business in the beginning of the chapter about John being told to measure the temple and those who worship there is about God's protection of his people. And yet, the next verses describe the unbelieving world killing the two witnesses and desecrating their dead bodies. When the Bible talks about God protecting his people the reference is always ultimately to final salvation – the preservation of their faith, the resurrection of their bodies and their vindication before the world. God may protect us the more severe forms of persecution and it is legitimate to pray for that, but clearly even if God allows us to be martyred, he is still protecting us if we are faithful unto death. God's protection may mean that we are not killed for our faith, but it may also mean that we are enabled to give our lives rather than deny God's message. Either way God's protection is salvation – the guarantee of being with the Lord forever no matter what happens to us in this earthly life.

So if we look at our lives from the perspective of this passage, it is very clear that God's call to us to be his witnesses and prophesy God's message to the world puts us in harms way as far as our earthly comforts are concerned. God sends his church into the world with a message that is very offensive to the world. It is in fact good news, but it takes a miracle for anyone to see it as good news. Sometimes God does that miracle and opens people's eyes to see the good news so they come to Jesus and are saved. But if God does not do that, the message is very offensive to those who hear it.

And as a result those who bring the message are often considered enemy #1. God's witnesses who bring God's message are considered to be a threat to the goals of governments or movements in society like the current progressive moment in the west which is trying to shape society in a way that is very different from God's message. Christians are often considered to be a dangerous and harmful influence in society whether that is in China where the government views faithful Christianity as a threat to its own power and influence or in Canada where the progressive movement is aggressively promoting the celebration of a variety of lifestyles that God's message condemns and calls for repentance.

This passage is showing us that God has sent the church into the world with a message that that is so offensive to many that the world will hate them for it and in some instances find great joy in killing them. This idea is conveyed by Jesus to his disciples when he said in Matthew 10:16, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." Jesus also made it clear that the world will treat his followers in the same way that it treated him. In John 15:20 he said to his disciples, "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." It turns out that just has God's way of salvation involved the suffering and death of Jesus, so God's way of bringing that salvation to the world

involves the suffering and dying of the church. The significance of our suffering and dying is not exactly the same as the significance of Jesus' suffering and dying, but there is a relationship between the two.

So this passage – Revelation 11:1-14 tells us what we can expect when we bring God's message to the world. We can expect to be hated by the world. We can expect some level of persecution, even if it does not end up that we are actually murdered. This passage is telling us that bringing God's message will provoke murderous hatred that in some cases will lead to murder and in other cases some kind of abuse that falls short of murder. We have to be ready for either. Being a Christian means being willing to die because of the message. It means belonging to a people who are so despised by the world that some of us do die because of the message. It means being willing to imitate Jesus who gave his life so that others may be saved. We are also called to give our lives so that others may be saved – even if Jesus' sacrifice has a deeper meaning than ours.

What does that mean for us? In the short term it is not likely to mean that we will be killed for our faith. But the idea of giving our lives in order to get the message out means different things in different settings. In our setting it means being willing to suffer the hatred and scorn of the world in order to get the message out. That will mean being willing to be public about our relationship to Jesus and his church. It will mean confessing our faith before men and not hiding the fact that we are Christians. It may mean having to take a stand that triggers the abuse of the world. And it will definitely mean making sacrifices in order to be part of the church's witness to the world.

There are different ways to give our lives to contribute to the church's witness to the world. Some of us are called to give their lives literally. But all of us are called to give our lives for Jesus – as part of the church's witness to the world. To give our lives for Jesus is to live them in a way that seeks his kingdom first of all. And that means enjoying his gifts with thanksgiving, but also making sacrifices in order to contribute to the mission of the church to bring the message to the world. If we are called to be willing to die to get the message out surely that includes sacrificing an evening at home in order to pray together for the success of the gospel and sacrificing substantially financially to support the mission of the church and sacrificing time in other ways to support the mission. The willingness to literally die for Christ implies the willingness to make sacrifices in other ways if God is not calling us to suffer that degree of persecution.

So as we look at this passage and see how God has sent the church to bring his message to a world which does not want to hear it even if that means martyrdom, surely we can see in that a call to die in less dramatic ways for the same purpose. The fact is that God has so arranged things that the kingdom advances through suffering and dying – first by Jesus and then by his followers.

But that does not mean that the Christian life is a downer and nothing but sadness and gloom and pain. Our text passage ends with the martyred being raised from the dead and ascending into heaven. The people who persecuted them experience the judgement of God. The people who were persecuted enter the presence of God. And that is infinitely worth it. Paul writes in Romans 8:18 "For I consider that the sufferings of this

present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote in 12:1-2, “[L]et us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the same, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” That is the message of our text as well.

Suffering as part of advancing the mission of the church is an important part of the Christian life as the Bible describes it. It may mean martyrdom, but if it does not it certainly means a form of martyrdom by which we sacrifice our lives for the mission of the church. That is a reality and it is not pleasant, but neither is it dark and depressing. It is suffering for a great purpose – the salvation of the world. There is no greater reason to make sacrifices than to be part of what God is doing – by contributing to the mission of the church to proclaim the message of God to the world. And our text holds out the hope – the joy set before us – the resurrection from the dead and the blessedness of being with God.

So let's consider our lives in the light of these verses. We should not be surprised at the hatred of the world. God has sent us to face that hatred even to the point of death because the salvation of the world involves the suffering of the Saviour and the suffering of his followers. In both cases that suffering is endured for the joy that is set before us.