

REV 11:1-19—THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

INTRO: Christmas is over—I hope you had a very good one. The year will also soon be over and the new year will begin. It seems to me that this is the perfect time to assess ourselves, our lives, what is most important to us, where we are going, and why. Yes, it is a busy time of the year. But that is, perhaps, the very reason why we need to sit back, listen, think, and consider “the big picture” for just a few minutes.

Jesus said, “**I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.**” Most of us have heard that before. Many of us believe it. But how does that—how does Jesus—inform and affect our day-to-day lives? Not only as individuals, but as a church. After all, the church is called “**the body of Christ.**” The church has been called to be a body, a family, as close as husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, moms, and dads.

Yet we here at Community Church come from all over the Fox Valley. And we are husbands and wives, brothers and sisters and moms and dads with other believers who go to other churches. Yet do we see ourselves as linked as closely with our fellow believers as we are with our earthly husband or wife, brothers and sisters and moms and dads? And do we see the cosmic importance of who we are, who the church is, and the central place we and the church as a whole are playing in God’s great plan for the world?

That is what I want to talk about today. And I will do so by taking a look at a chapter of Scripture that is not looked at very often: **Revelation, ch. 11.**

BACKGROUND: First, to properly understand the book of Revelation, we need to understand that it is a particular type of writing called “apocalyptic.” This type of writing was prominent in Jewish and Christian circles from about 250 BC to 250 AD. It is based all on symbols, not like most historical books such as the book of Acts or epistles like those of Paul or Peter or James or John. In a book like this, very different symbols may be used for the same thing. We will see that when we look at **ch. 11.**

Second, apocalyptic writing aims at the heart of matters: the most important things, including such matters as the end of the world. The book of Revelation is all about the church: the book explains to the church how God is dealing with the world; it is a call to the church to persevere in the struggle against evil; and it was written to comfort and encourage the church because Christ is the ultimate victor.

Third, the book is not just a single narrative story starting at the beginning and moving to the end, such as a historical narrative like the book of Genesis or Exodus. Instead, like other prophetic or apocalyptic books such as Daniel, Revelation consists of a series of overlapping sections: each section begins in the first century when John wrote and ends with the second coming of Christ and the judgment. Then, the next section goes back and covers the same ground, only using different symbols and imagery. If you are interested, I deal with all of this, including a commentary on Revelation, in my book *Biblical Eschatology*.

With that background, we can proceed to **Revelation, ch. 11.**

O/S: What I will do is read and talk about **ch. 11** section-by-section. As we go through this chapter, we will see two things: (1) how vital you—the church—are in God’s plan for the world; and (2) How central Christ—and our linkage to him—is.

I. vv. 1-2: Some people might think of this as a literal temple—either the temple that was in Jerusalem or perhaps some temple that may be constructed in the future. However, to think that way does not take into account the *purpose* of the book (which is directed to the church of all times, from the 1st century to the

Second Coming); it does not take into account the *structure* of the book (in which progressively parallel sections recapitulate the challenges facing the church during all periods of history); and it does not take into account the *symbolic nature* of the book.

One commentator puts it this way: He says, when we take Revelation's apocalyptic genre seriously, **"It is hardly too much to say that, in a book in which all things are expressed in symbols, the very last things the temple and the holy city could mean would be the physical temple and the earthly Jerusalem. If John had wanted to speak about them, he would have found some imagery to convey his meaning without lapsing into the inconsistency of literalism."**

The "temple" here is a symbol of the church. In fact, about 11 times in the NT the church is explicitly called **"the temple of God."** We see the symbolic nature of the temple by the fact that John is told to "measure" not only the temple and the altar but also **"those who worship in it."** Throughout the Bible, "measuring" is not merely a physical act to determine the size of something but to measure expresses the thought of preservation, not of destruction. God is not interested in preserving physical buildings, since he **"does not dwell in houses made by human hands."** Rather, he is interested in preserving his people, the church, which is his temple, since he dwells in us, not in a building.

The same is true of the "holy city" in v. 2: It is not talking about Jerusalem or any other physical city but is another symbol for the church. We know that for 2 reasons: first, although Jerusalem had been called the "holy city" in the OT and during Jesus' ministry on earth, after his resurrection and ascension, Jerusalem never again was called the "holy city"; second, in the book of Revelation, the term "holy city" is used four times, and it is always contrasted with the "great city," mystery Babylon—the great anti-Christian empire, culture, worldview. We see such a reference in v. 8 [READ].

Note one other thing, in v. 2 the "outer court" is related to the "holy city." The "outer court" was *not* measured but will be tread under foot. Thus, the "outer court" suggests the outer experience of the church that faces persecution, as opposed to the inner, spiritual safety of the church which has been "measured" and is protected by God. IOW, if we are in Christ, we are secure, even though externally we may face hardships.

The "42 months" when the holy city will be trod under foot, again, is not a literal 3½-year period. Several times in Revelation, John refers to a 3½-year period, sometimes as 42 months, sometimes as 1260 days, as he does in v. 3, and sometimes as **"time, times, and half-a-time."** This 3½-year period is derived from the Maccabean Revolt, which took place from about 167-164 BC, the initial phase of which lasted 3½ years, in which the Jews defeated their oppressive ruler and gained their independence. Between then and the writing of the NT, this period became generalized in the literature to refer to any period of time whenever God's people are facing hard times until their final vindication. As one writer put it, these time periods **"are all theological, not chronological, designations. They have in view the kind or quality of time, not its duration."** It is used that way here. It is the time we are in *now*—beginning in the 1st century until the church is vindicated at the 2nd Coming of Christ.

In the OT, the temple was where the Shekinah glory of God came to dwell in a special way. The same is true of us today. God is not "exterior" to the church, but he has come to live inside of us. There can be no more intimate union than that. That shows us that we are of *infinite* importance to God. And yet, we will suffer in this world. That is *not* a sign that God is angry with us or has left us. Jesus said, **"I will never leave you or forsake you."** Instead, our suffering is one of the means God is using to refine us, to mature us, to make us more like Jesus himself. After all, Jesus said, **"I am a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief."** If that is true of him, why do we think we are exempt from persecution and suffering?

This leads us to vv. 3-14.

II. vv. 3-14: As with the temple and the holy city, some people think that the “two witnesses” are two individuals. Again, that is not consistent with the type of book Revelation is and what is going on here. Although the “two witnesses” were probably modeled on Moses and Elijah, as with the temple and the holy city, the “two witnesses” are yet another symbol of the church, probably in its capacity as a witness. We know that because the attributes of the “two witnesses” are always applied collectively, IOW, they are always treated as a single entity. So, **v. 5** says **“fire flows out of their mouth.”** That statement cannot be “literal.” It alone is sufficient to indicate that these are not individual human beings, since fire doesn’t come from people’s mouths. Also, the word “mouth” is singular. Similarly, **v. 8** refers to their **“dead body,”** not “bodies.” Although most translations say “bodies,” the Greek is singular.

Note that in **v. 3**, the “two witnesses”—the church—will prophesy for 1260 days—again, a symbolic term—signifying the period from the 1st century until Christ comes again. But **vv. 7** and **10** tell us that we will face opposition, even death because of our witness. That has always happened to the church in all parts of the world for the last 2000 years and will continue to do so until Christ returns.

The importance of the “two witnesses”—IOW, the church as witness—is seen in **v. 10**, which says **[READ]**. Note that 2X it refers to **“those who dwell on the earth.”** That phrase repeatedly occurs throughout Revelation. It always has a negative meaning. It indicates that, at their essence, unbelievers approach life from a worldly perspective and mindset; they are *of* the world in addition to being *in* the world. As such, they follow the ways of the world and fall under God’s condemnation.

In fact, throughout Revelation, all of humanity is seen as being a member of one of two, mutually opposing, camps: the world or the church; those who dwell on the earth or those who are citizens of heaven; those who worship the beast or those who worship the Lamb; those who bear the mark of the beast or those who are sealed by God; those whose names have not been written in the book of life or those whose names have been written in the book of life; those who are part of the “great city” or those who are part of the “beloved or holy city.” There is no “neutral” or third alternative. The entire book of Revelation provides the heavenly perspective of the true significance of what is occurring on earth, so that believers can be conformed to the image of Christ.

But **vv. 11-12** show us that our suffering and death is not the end. Though we may die on this earth, the church is the ultimate victor. The description in **vv. 11-12** is taken from **Ezek 37:5, 10 [READ]**. Greg Beale states, **“The ascent of the witnesses figuratively affirms a final, decisive deliverance and vindication of God’s people at the end of time. . . . John applies Ezekiel’s words to the restored church because he sees its members finally released from their earthly pilgrimage of captivity and suffering. This demonstrates that they are God’s true people.”**

This brings us to the last section of **ch. 11, vv. 15-19**.

III. vv. 15-19: The sounding of the seventh trumpet announces the coming of the kingdom, the judgment, and the reign of God and Christ. So, as I said, this ends one section in Revelation and takes us to the Second Coming and the judgment. The final judgment applies to everybody—it includes both God’s wrath against and destruction of **“those who destroy the earth”** and his reward of his people, **“the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name.”** The lightning, thunder, earthquake, and great hailstorm referred to in **v. 19** are symbolic biblical descriptions depicting when God manifests himself. It is similar to the description of God’s appearance on Mount Sinai in **Exod 19**. It is an awesome scene.

All this is telling us is that, although we may not be able to see it or understand it now, everything that is happening on earth is part of God’s plan and is under his sovereign control. As **v. 15** tells us, we may be living in **“the kingdom of the world”** now, but it will not always be this way. It will be **“the kingdom of**

our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.” And we are at the very heart of his plan. In fact,

PROP: What this chapter is telling us is: Our life, as Christians and as the church, is of infinite importance in this world, because Christ is of infinite importance in the entire universe.

SO WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US? This chapter is giving us the “big picture”—in symbolic imagery—of who this Jesus is and the important role we can play in bringing about his plan for the world. Jesus is at the very center. Whatever happens on earth has its origin in heaven and is under the control of Jesus. He is the one who breaks the seals of the book of God’s plan in **Revelation ch. 6**, which unleashes all kinds of forces on the earth. In **ch. 8**, he is the one who broke the 7th seal to unleash the trumpets, the last of which we saw here in **ch. 11**. He is the one who **7:17** says, is **“in the center of the throne and will be their shepherd and will guide them to springs of the water of life.”** He is the one who will turn the kingdom of the world into the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and will reign forever and ever.

How can we hold anything back from a being like this? With a being like this, how can we not cast ourself into his arms, body and soul—our time, our finances, our relationships, how we treat people, how we do everything? How can we not worship such a being? Seek him. Spend time with him. There is no one and nothing more important than him in the entire universe.

Earlier I reminded us that he is living inside of us. There is no more intimate relationship in the entire universe than this. He is not simply saying **“I am sovereign, so you had better work harder at being good.”** Instead, he is letting us know, **“Yes, I am sovereign, but I gave up everything for you, because I love you, because I want you. And I will guide you to springs of the water of life. You can trust me, because I was faithful to the Father all the way to the end. Come to me. Draw upon me. Because you don’t have to live the life I have planned for you alone. I will enable you to live a life more fulfilling, more satisfying, and better than you can imagine, if only you let me live my life out through you.”**

What does this look like? In **John 14:17**, Jesus said that the HS **“will be in you”** and in the next verse said **“I will come to you.”** IOW, he is inside of us in the person of the HS. **Colossians 3** speaks of **“Christ who is our life.”** **Gal 2:20** says, **“I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”** **Phil 2:12-13** says we are to **“work out—not work for—our own salvation”** and then adds the crucial phrase **“for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”** All of this means that God is active in us, putting thoughts in our head, working on our will, our feelings, our actions, to make us just like Jesus himself. Sometimes we are consciously aware of this; most of the time we are not—but it is happening to all of us who have received Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

What is the end result? In **v. 18** we saw a description of the judgment, where the dead will be judged, the followers of Jesus will be rewarded and those who destroy the earth will themselves be destroyed. Matthew gives another depiction of this in **Matthew 25**, when he talks about the sheep and the goats **[DESCRIBE]**.

In time-travel movies, people are often afraid, when they go back in time, of doing even little things that might change anything in the past because that might change the present. Yet, Jesus is saying to us, **“If you draw upon me in all you do, even the little things will change the future in a wonderful way that you might not be able to see, but that I do.”** You see, we—his people, the church—are at the center of his plan, and he is at the center of the throne of the universe. It is through his people, the church, that Christ actualizes his plan for the world. Consequently, we, the church are of infinite importance in this

world, because Christ is of infinite importance in the entire universe. Life with Jesus at the center is a great adventure. It is more meaningful than we can imagine now.

CONCL: Think about these things. Think about your relationship with Jesus. If you have not yet come to Jesus as the Lord of your life, come to him now. You can do that right where you are sitting. You simply need to acknowledge him for who he is—God himself who came to earth as a man. Acknowledge that you have been going your own way your whole life, but turn from yourself to him. Ask him to come inside of you as the one in charge of your life, and commit to follow him wherever he leads you.

If you did that sometime in the past, but he seems to be remote, he is not—he is inside of you and will never leave you or forsake you. Speak to him, submit to him, love him. In his Word, he has told us what is important. So spend regular time in his Word, and think about what you read. If you let his values be your values, his priorities be your priorities, and his will be your will, he will speak to you and begin working in you and through you in ways you may find hard now even to imagine. If you start living in a dynamic, new, sold-out relationship with Jesus, in 6 months, a year, 2 years, 5 years, you will look back and say, **“Lord, I never knew it could be this good.”**