

Dr. David L. Mathewson, Revelation, Session 16,

Revelation 11: Temple and Two Witnesses

6-Min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

All right, today we are diving into one of the Bible's most cryptic and honestly fascinating passages, Revelation chapter 11. I mean, this chapter throws a real puzzle at us. You've got these two huge, powerful images: a temple getting measured by God, and then these two mysterious witnesses who seem totally invincible right up until they're killed.

So what in the world is going on here? Let's try and decode this thing together. Okay, so our first big clue kicks off the chapter. The author John gets this strange command to measure a temple.

Now, you know, this isn't some brand new idea. John is pulling from a playbook used by Old Testament prophets like Ezekiel and Zechariah. They also had these visions of measuring God's holy spaces.

And here's the thing you always have to remember with the book of Revelation, right? The key is to think in symbols, not just literally. This imagery is packed with meaning. And so, of course, people have come up with a few different ideas about what this temple could be.

Some folks see a literal physical building, either one that was already destroyed or one that's going to be built in the future. But the source we're looking at today really leans into that fourth option. The idea here is that the temple is actually a powerful metaphor for the people of God, the church, living throughout this entire period of history.

So if the temple represents God's people, what's up with the measuring tape? Well, it's not about blueprints or square footage. In the symbolic language of the Bible, measuring is all about ownership and, crucially, protection. It's like God is putting up a sign that says, "These people are mine."

They're marked. They're preserved. I've got them covered.

And this leads us to this really critical contrast in the vision. The inner court, the very heart of the temple, gets measured. It's protected.

But the outer court, that's left unmeasured, and it gets trampled by the nations. So you have this wild contrast happening at the exact same time. Spiritually, the church is completely secure with God.

But physically, out in the world, yeah, it's still vulnerable to suffering. Okay, let's switch gears to our second big clue, which builds on this whole idea: the two witnesses. These two figures just show up on the scene, prophesying for a very specific amount of time, and trying to figure out who they are is one of the chapter's biggest mysteries.

The good news is, the text gives us some pretty massive hints about who or what these witnesses really represent. And it does it through their incredible, almost superhero-like actions. And check out these powers.

They're not random at all. They're direct callbacks to the miracles of two of the Old Testament's biggest heavy hitters. Moses, who brought the plagues on Egypt, and Elijah, who could call down fire and stop the rain.

This tells us right away that their role is prophetic. They're speaking and acting with God's power. Now get this, this is the key that basically unlocks the whole thing.

The text flat-out tells us that the two witnesses are the two lampstands. And if you remember from way back in chapter 1 of Revelation, the book actually defines its own symbols. And what are the lampstands? The churches.

Boom. So there you have it. The two witnesses aren't just two individuals.

They're a symbol for the entire faithful witnessing church. It's kind of like how a political cartoonist can draw one single figure of Uncle Sam to represent the whole U.S. government. In the same way, these two figures represent a much larger body.

But why two? Why not one or seven? Well, the source we're looking at points to two big reasons. First, it's a legal thing. In the Old Testament, you needed at least two witnesses for a testimony to be considered valid in court.

Second, it's a model. Remember the seven churches from the beginning of Revelation? Only two of them got straight-up praise for being faithful witnesses. No strings attached.

Alright, now let's get into the numbers because this chapter throws a few at us. We're told the outer court is trampled and the witnesses prophesy for what seemed like very specific periods of time. First, we get 42 months.

Then, right after that, we see 1,260 days. And if you pull out your calculator and use a 30-day month, which was pretty standard back then, you'll find that both of those are, you guessed it, three and a half years. So the point here isn't to get bogged down trying to create a literal calendar.

These numbers are all saying the same thing, just symbolically. They're describing the character of the entire church age. It's a period of intense trial and persecution, but, and this is key, it's limited.

The number three and a half is half of seven, the biblical number for completion. So this period of trial is, by definition, incomplete. It has an end date.

Okay, this next part is maybe the biggest twist in the whole chapter. It's a real paradox that gets to the heart of what it means to be the church in the world. On one hand, for their entire ministry, these witnesses are untouchable.

Seriously, fire shoots from their mouths to take out their enemies. Nobody can mess with them without facing serious consequences. And yet, the second their testimony is finished, the whole script flips.

This beast from the abyss, a symbol for a powerful, evil empire, is allowed to attack them, conquer them, and kill them. So what gives? How can they be both all-powerful and totally vulnerable? Well, as scholar Richard Bauckham puts it, we're not supposed to read this like a simple timeline of them winning, and then they lost. It's better to see it as a parable.

It's showing us two sides of the same coin. The church is spiritually empowered by God, but at the very same time, it's physically vulnerable to suffering and persecution out in the world. But wait, the story, this parable, doesn't end with them defeated in the street.

After they're killed, the world actually throws a party. They leave their bodies out in the open, which back then was the ultimate sign of public shame and disrespect. But then, God gets the final say.

After a symbolic three and a half days, which is meant to echo Christ's resurrection, the breath of life from God re-enters them. They stand up. And then, in front of everyone who hated them, they're taken up to heaven.

God completely flips the world's judgment on its head and proves their witness was right all along. And in the end, judgment falls, and their enemies are forced to acknowledge God's power. So when you put it all together, the ultimate message of Revelation 11 is this powerful picture of courageous perseverance.

It shows that a faithful witness often looks like defeat from the world's point of view. But in God's story, that very witness is the one that's protected, honored, and ultimately victorious.