

Sermon 38: Revelation 11:4-6: 'Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit', says the Lord.'

OUTLINE

The two lampstands

The two prophets

INTRODUCTION

2 Cor. 12:9-10, 'But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.' The paradox of Christian suffering is that through death life comes, though defeat victory comes and through weakness comes strength. This undercurrent of paradox is what lies behind the experience of the Church in the book of Revelation and especially as it is symbolised in the 2 witnesses. Slain lambs defeating a dragon, beheaded victims overcoming the executioner, and the outnumbered witnesses are God's canvases for displaying His glory, the weakness of the flesh and the impotency of the devil.

As we continue looking at the witnesses we will see that God is building His church by His power, and the church though weak is powerful.

The two lampstands

V4, 'These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.' The OT is the dictionary for the symbols in Revelation. The symbols are used to convey a 1000 words in a single picture. The two witnesses are not merely 2 men, but they are also 2 olive trees and 2 lampstands, what does this mean? These symbols are taken directly from Zechariah 4 and we need to visit the context of that chapter to get the message God intends here. Zechariah was one of the 3 post-exilic prophets along with Haggai and Malachi. Haggai and Zechariah had a very important part to play in the rebuilding process in Israel. The temple, true religion and the nation needed to be re-established after the cream of Israel had been away in exile for 70 years. 5 months after Haggai's ministry that called Israel to repentance and to rebuild the temple in earnest, Zechariah is given 8 visions in one night to build up Israel. These are intended to be visions of encouragement showing God as faithful and present to rebuild and fulfil His promises. The pictures of the lampstands and the olive trees come from Zech. 4, and it is the 5th of the 8 visions.

Let us consider the original significance of these visions. In Zechariah's vision he is shown a single golden lampstand with two olive trees beside it. The two olive trees, the place from which olive oil is derived represent the two anointed ones 4:14. Some think it could be Zerubbabel and Joshua, as representing the king and high priest, but others think it could

be Haggai and Zechariah because Zerubbabel was never anointed as king. I agree with this notion of the olive trees representing the prophets who feed olive oil, representing the Holy Spirit to the lampstand. The lampstand is a familiar part of the temple furniture and most likely indicates the temple which was at that very time being rebuilt. The prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah were instrumental in facilitating a revival which led to the Israelites who had been building their own houses for 20 years and leaving the temple unbuilt to begin rebuilding in earnest. This vision was an encouragement particularly aimed at Zerubbabel. God is telling Zerubbabel that the seemingly impossible task will be done by the influence of God's Spirit, 4:6, 'Then he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.' This is probably the most famous verse in Z and best known. Israel at this time was politically and militarily vulnerable. The city had no wall, they were recovering from a depression, they had enemies all around trying to undermine their efforts, they had a small population, they had many external reasons for discouragement. This message is a reminder that it is not the arm of the flesh that gets results but God by His Spirit. The call is not for Z to look for strength in those things that give us confidence in the flesh like strong armies, walls and military alliances but rather trust in God's hidden work of the Spirit. Specifically it is emphasizing the ministry of the Spirit working by the words of the prophets.

Now let us apply this to Revelation 11. In Rev. 11 there is a temple which represents the church, it is a temple that is being trodden and trampled, it is vulnerable and exposed. But this same temple is also pictured as the two witnesses who are also the olive trees as well as the lampstand. Please notice that where in Zech. 4 the trees and the lampstand are separate, in Rev. 11 they are identified with one another. This is because the temple is now the people. Zerubbabel faced the impossible task of rebuilding, the church is facing an impossible task. Zerubbabel saw that task completed by the Spirit using the word of the prophets to move mountains. We too will see the church upheld and empowered by the Spirit blessing our words to complete the task that we have been set. The encouragement for us is that we can expect God to faithfully provide the power that we need. We may appear weak and overrun but we can know that by the Spirit we are strengthened. Appearances are nothing. Death could not resist the Spirit raising Christ from the dead, there is no chance that the Church can ever be overcome either.

Notice in verse 4 that the witnesses are described as those who stand before the Lord of the earth. This proximity to God implies security, favour, access and holy of holies type intimacy with God.

The two prophets

We see in verse 5 that the prophets will because of their faithful witness provoke persecution. But the prophets cannot be harmed. Now, we are reading a symbolic book where we have just seen a picture of a measured temple which is simultaneously trampled, now we have the picture of prophets who cannot be harmed, given the main message of the book of revelation that the church can be harmed externally, as in the body can be killed, but that death is the doorway to reigning with Christ in the intermediate state. As the

church is pictured as 2 individuals we understand that fact that they cannot be harmed to refer to them being impervious to any final harm.

We are told that if any try to harm that they are consumed by fire coming out of their mouths. Is this literal? As we read through revelation we see a similar description of Christ who has a double edged sword coming out of His mouth. This is not to imply that these two prophets have more impressive super powers, both are symbolic. Christ is pictured with a sword in His mouth in 1:16, and 19:15 and 21, and in 2:16 we see how He Himself applies this, 'Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.' This is not the promise of a giant sword appearing out of nothing and decapitating people, but judgement. Jeremiah 5 also speaks of God's word as fire for judgement, 'Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts: "Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them.' The fact that the fire is coming out of the mouths of the prophets is probably an indication of the judgement that ensues upon those who reject the gospel.

Verse 6 speaks about the powers of the prophets, but these cannot be understood unless we revisit the trumpets. Do you remember that the 7th seal was out of chronology, it was a picture of the prayers of the saints returning to earth in powerful ways? Do you remember how it was the 7th seal which began the first trumpet indicating that the judgements that ensued were directly linked to the persecution and prayers of the saints? And do you remember that we said that this interlude is not chronological but runs concurrently with the trumpets, in fact interpreting them. This is all important info as we look at the powers of the 2 prophets. There are many similarities between these two plague powers and the trumpet judgements. We are to deliberately make the connection in thought between the persecution, prayers and message of the church and the resulting judgements upon those who persecute the church.

V6, '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.' We have mentioned that these are prophets like Elijah and Moses. These prophets both lived in crucial times which bear upon the experience of the church in this age. Elijah was a minority prophet in an age of idolatry and was used to judge the reigning idolatrous powers. Moses was called to lead the people of God out of Egypt and judge them with many plagues as justice against the cruel things done against His people and to demonstrate how all the idols of Egypt are nothing. The token powers are stopping the rain repeating the famine like conditions of the first four trumpets, and turning the water to blood representing the 10 plagues of Egypt which were woven into the trumpet judgements as well. The church is called to be a prophet witness to the idolatry of the nations, calling all to repentance and promising final judgement against those who do not repent; and by their words and prayers, and God in response to persecution acted upon them, they see minor judgements anticipating and warning of the end to come to pass. The warning comes in the form of a grand irony, the very ones who the world tries to wipe out are the ones, by their bodies being killed and their message

rejected, they seal the judgement of the unbelieving world. In other words there are two stings in the tail of the persecuted Christian. Firstly, we not only escape the devil when he kills us but enter into victory by apparent defeat. Secondly, it is by attacking the church and attempting to wipe it out that the unbelieving world brings judgement upon itself and destroys itself.

Let us conclude. I cant help but think of the Christians who were martyred under the Roman empire and the effect they had upon the Roman regime. 2 raggedly dressed crazy men who everyone hated and wanted to kill, this is the perfect picture of being rejected and the outcast. This was how Christianity was viewed by Rome. They were seen as atheists, cannibals, and disturbers of the peace. They were persecuted in the most horrible ways, but in dying in the arena being weak and faithful in the face of lions and torture, God used them to bring down the very kingdom that waged war against them. We face an insurmountable foe, how can we turn a generation that has already agreed with the status quo that we are irrelevant, that science has disproven our faith, that we are self-deceived bigots who only want to curb human freedom, and are as bad as any suicide bomber? We must be reminded of this picture. We cannot think that we must dress ourselves up for the world's approval. We cannot think that we must change what we say to sound sane to the ignorant. No, we trust in God's Spirit to build His church while we faithfully preach and suffer. This means that as we go out into our jobs and workplaces that we do not adjust our message, or compromise to try and find a middle ground. Rather we recognise that this is what God said we would be, weak but strong. Despised, but we will never be overcome. We cannot compromise simply because our ratings are down, we do not live or preach for man's approval, but God's.