

Lesson 25

Last week when we ended we were looking at verses 1-2 of Chapter 11. In those two verses, we saw two beautiful symbols for the church.

In verse 1, we saw the church as the measured temple of God, which shows us figuratively what Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 2:19 — “The Lord knoweth them that are his.”

In verse 2, we saw the church as the holy city that would be trodden under foot by Rome for 42 months. We talked about the symbol of the 42 months, and how that symbol is a broken seven (three and a half years). God is hitting Rome with waves of sevens, but all Rome can do in response is hit the church with a broken seven.

God is giving the church a very important message in verse 2. It’s the same message we see in Romans 8.

***Romans 8:31** — If God be for us, who can be against us?*

God is telling the church that he will not permit the church to be annihilated — something that must have been a **real fear** for Christians at this time. How could the church withstand mighty Rome when so many powerful nations had fallen under the Roman military onslaught? Did the church stand a chance against Rome? God is answering that question here.

Do we have similar fears today? It is easy to become discouraged when we look at the state of the Lord’s church today in a culture that seems to be in free fall, and sometimes seems to be carrying the church down with it. “When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). The answer to that question can be yes, and should be yes — but only if we are faithful and only if we pass that faith on to future generations through our faithful proclamation of the gospel. We must have a **great desire** for the word of God — and we must pass that great desire on to our children and on to others. **We should not be discouraged.** If we are faithful to Christ, then the encouraging promises of Revelation are our promises as well. But if we ever stop proclaiming the word of God to a lost and hostile world, then we have good reason to be discouraged, and the answer to Jesus’ question in Luke 18:8 may be “no.”

Revelation 4-22 tells us that God will not permit anyone to conquer the church from without. But when it comes to the church crumbling from within, that's Revelation 2-3, and those chapters tell us that we are responsible to prevent that from happening.

One last point about verse 2 — it sounds very similar to Luke 21:24.

Luke 21:24 — Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.

Is that verse from Luke 21 describing the same thing as Revelation 11:2? No, but there is a relation between the two verses. Remember one of our key interpretive principles: similarity of language does not prove identity of subject.

Luke 21 is describing Rome's attack on *old* Jerusalem, which occurred in AD 70, about a decade before John received this vision. Revelation 11 is describing Rome's attack on *new* Jerusalem. The "Gentiles" in Luke 21 and Revelation 11 are the same — the Romans — but the target of the Romans has shifted from Jerusalem to the church. In our study of Zechariah we saw where he had prophesied about *both* assaults — Rome's assault against Jerusalem and Rome's assault against the church. Those are the same two assaults we see in Luke 21 and Revelation 11.

Revelation 11:3-4

3 And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and threescore days, clothed in sackcloth.
4 These are the two olive trees, and the two candlesticks standing before the God of the earth.

Remember that the number two is something we have been on the lookout for in our study of this book. So far we have seen that number running through the text like a thread, usually as a symbol for Rome. Rome had been founded by Romulus and Remus, twins raised by a beast, and Rome is represented in this book as two beasts, one from the earth and one from the sea. In the first century, Rome was led by two dynasties, each capped off by an evil persecutor of the church — Nero and Domitian.

What can God send against the Roman twins? Verses 3 and 4 answer that question. And notice that the number two appears three times in these two verses. (This is my fourth time to teach this book, and I completely missed the significance of the number two the first three times I taught the book!)

In verse 3, the angel (speaking as a messenger of God) says, “I will give power to my two witnesses.” **Who are these two witnesses?** Before we answer that question, let’s look at the four clues to their identity given in the text.

- They shall prophecy 1260 days.
- They are clothed in sackcloth.
- They are the two olive trees.
- They are the two candlesticks standing before God.

So, now with that on the table, **who are the two witnesses?**

Many different answers have been proposed to that question, including Moses and Elijah or Enoch and Elijah. Some say the two witnesses denote the Old Testament and the New Testament, while others say they denote the prophets and the apostles. Others say that the two witnesses are the apostles and the Holy Spirit, pointing for support to John 15:26. Some of those proposals have merit, but, in my opinion, the two witnesses here in verse 3 are **the church**.

But you sound like a broken record! Can this symbol really be yet another symbol for the church? It is starting to seem like nearly every symbol we come to somehow describes the church! **Exactly!** And that is how it seemed to its first century readers and listeners as well. They were left with precisely the impression that God wanted them to have — **the church is so important to God and so loved by God that he is constantly looking at it and caring for it and thinking about it! Jesus is in love with his church! If you ever doubt that, read Revelation!**

But on what basis can we say that the two witnesses in verse 3 denote the church? Because, in verse 4, they are called **two olive trees** and **two candlesticks**.

The word “candlestick” should immediately make us think of the church.

***Revelation 1:20** — And the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.*

And we previously discussed why a candlestick is a perfect image for the church. But we also have two olive trees. Where have we seen that before? We saw that image in our study of Zechariah.

In Zechariah 4:14, two olive trees were used to denote two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth. They are Zerubbabel of the royal line and Joshua, the High Priest. What is it that combines both the priesthood and royalty? The church. We are a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9) and a kingdom of priests (Revelation 1:6). In Zechariah 4, the two olive trees represented Christ, the perfect King and High Priest. Here in Revelation 11, the two olive trees represent the witnesses for Christ, the church of Christ, which is the royal priesthood with Christ as our King and Christ as our High Priest.

But why are there **two** witnesses? Some suggest it is because we have witnesses, and, as John 8:17 tell us, in the law, “the testimony of two men is true.” So perhaps the number two just denotes the confirmed testimony of the church. Perhaps, but I don’t think that’s the answer. I think we need to dig a little deeper.

So, if that’s not the answer, then what is the answer? Why are there **two** witnesses? Remember how we started this discussion — what could God send against the evil Roman twins? The answer is that God could send the royal priesthood — another combination of two, but one infinitely more powerful than the Roman two. Christ combines royalty with priesthood, and so does the church of Christ. In that sense, the one church is a two, and that is why we see the church here depicted by two witnesses, two candlesticks, and two olive trees.

And think about Rome for a moment. Wasn’t it also two in this sense? Yes. Rome was a kingdom, and Rome was a priesthood. Rome combined military power with false Caesar worship. Later we will see this division shown to us as a beast from the earth and a beast from the sea. So what great power could overcome Rome? The royal priesthood established by God had been prophesied centuries earlier in Daniel 2:44 to one day overthrow the royal priesthood created by man. That is what we are seeing here, and that explains why we see the number two used so often in these verses.

Why do the two witnesses prophecy in sackcloth?

Sackcloth was a coarse fabric woven from goat or camel hair, and it was worn at times of mourning or penitence. It was also the characteristic attire of the Old Testament prophets. Here it is a reminder of the mission of the church to

proclaim God's word, but it is also a reminder of the plight of the church suffering under Roman persecution. Rome may have been trampling the church, but Rome was not able to stop the church. The proclamation of the gospel continued despite Rome's best efforts to stamp it out.

Once again, we have a lesson for the church today. God is depending on his church to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. He has given us that great commission, and he expects us to do it. If we do not do it, then it will not be done. Even in the darkest hours of persecution, God expected the church to continue its mission — and it did. What excuse will we have if we are ever found to have failed in that mission? If they preached Christ in the face of death, then how will God respond if we fail to preach Christ in the face of ridicule?

Finally, why do the two witnesses prophesy for 1260 days?

We have already looked at this question. Remember in our discussion of the 42 months in verse 2 we noted that 42 months is 1260 days — and both are three and a half years, a broken seven.

God was about to hit Rome with a seven. All Rome could do against the church is hit it with a broken seven — and during that temporary period of persecution, these verses tell us that God would continue to provide power to the church, and the church would continue its mission to proclaim God's word. That is the message of verses 3-4.

Revelation 11:5-7

5 And if any man will hurt them, fire proceedeth out of their mouth, and devoureth their enemies: and if any man will hurt them, he must in this manner be killed. 6 These have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy: and have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will. 7 And when they shall have finished their tes-

timony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them.

At first, in verses 5-6, we see the two witnesses looking more like unstoppable super heroes with super powers. Anyone who harms them is doomed to be killed by fire proceeding from their mouths. They, like Elijah and Elisha, have the power to shut the sky that no rain may fall. They, like Moses and Aaron, have the power to smite the earth with plagues.

But then in verse 7 it looks like everything changes. It seems that this pair was not unstoppable after all. The beast from the pit wages war against them and kills them. I guess that means that verse 7 is the end of the story for the two witnesses, right? We know that's not right! Verses 5-7 show the two witnesses following the footsteps of their Master by being faithful unto death — and that is something about Jesus that we will be reminded of in the very next verse, verse 8.

We know that verse 7 is not a permanent defeat for the church. How do we know that? Many reasons. First, God started this vision off by telling us the ending — we have already seen the church rejoicing in its victory. Second, Daniel had told us centuries earlier that Rome, not the church, would be destroyed, and that the church, not Rome, would be the eternal kingdom. Third, Jesus has already told us in this book that, for the faithful, death is the pathway to victory, not the pathway to defeat. And we could go on and on. We know that verse 7 is not the end of the story for the church.

Rome may have believed it would be victorious. Rome may have appeared to all the world to be victorious. The church may have even thought that Rome was going to be victorious. And so, for now at least, Rome is pictured as being victorious. But, as we will soon see, that victory is only an illusion. As terrible as the beast from the bottomless pit was, it could not stop the church.

Why show their defeat at all if it's not a real defeat? One word — **drama!** These verses are the part of the show where it looks like the hero is dead for sure! How will he ever get out of this one?

But there's another reason — these verses drive home the central theme of this book: **things are not what they seem!**

To the outside world, the church seemed powerless. Does the church look powerless to you in verses 5 and 6? Hardly! The church is destroying its enemies, creating droughts, and bringing forth plagues — all things that were done by God's people in the Old Testament.

But how do God's people accomplish these things? Through their own power? No. Through carnal weapons? No. They accomplish these things through prayer and the power of God and the power of God's word. That's how it worked in the Old Testament, and that's how it works now.

***James 5:17** — Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and **he prayed earnestly** that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.*

The church is the most powerful kingdom there has ever been and ever will be. If we don't feel powerful, then we are not viewing the church as God views the church, which means that we are not viewing the church correctly. Listen to Jesus, and ask yourself whether the church is powerful.

***Matthew 16:18** — Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

You mean that the beast from the bottomless pit in verse 7 won't be able to destroy the church? Yes — not even the gates of hell shall prevail against it!

And the Bible — is it powerful?

***Hebrews 4:12** — For the word of God is quick, and **powerful**, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*

And the gospel — is that powerful?

***Romans 1:16** — For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.*

And prayer?

James 5:16 — *The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*

We are members of the most powerful kingdom in history; our Lord and King is King of kings and Lord of lords; and we have been given tools and weapons that are infinitely more powerful than anything this world could ever bring against them. That's how powerful the church is! **That's how powerful we are!**

But the witnesses are dead in verse 7 — how could that be powerful? Let's let Paul answer that question for us.

Romans 8:36-39 — *As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

We are more than conquerors! If we remain faithful to Christ, then nothing can harm us! That's the message of Romans 8, and that's the message of Revelation.

Revelation 11:8

8 And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.

In verse 2, we saw the holy city, which we concluded was the church. Here in verse 8, we the great city. **What is the great city?**

Before we read the description given in the verse, let's ask this question: what would we **expect** the great city to be? So far, this book has been focused on the conflict between the church and Rome, and in verse 2 we saw the church. Wouldn't we expect to see Rome here in verse 8? If we have two cities (the holy

city and the great city), wouldn't we expect them to depict the church and Rome?

Our **expectation**, of course, is not evidence, and our expectations could lead us astray if we rely on them and ignore the text — but conversely, if our identification of the great city in verse 8 does not make sense in the context and the time frame of the remainder of the book, then perhaps we should look more closely at the text. In short, our answer should make sense.

How do we know the holy city in verse 2 and the great city in verse 8 are not the same city? After all, the church is called both the “holy city” and the “great city” elsewhere in the book.

***Revelation 21:2** — And I John saw **the holy city**, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

***Revelation 21:10** — And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me **that great city**, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.*

Yes, but Rome is also called a great city elsewhere in the book.

***Revelation 14:8** — And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, **that great city**, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.*

***Revelation 17:18** — And the woman which thou sawest is **that great city**, which reigneth over the kings of the earth.*

So is the great city here in verse 8 the holy city of Revelation 21:2, 10, or is it the great city of Revelation 14:8, 17:18. Here is where the rest of verse 8 is crucial. As we read the description of the great city in verse 8, the first comparison we see is **Sodom** — that alone let's us know we are not looking at the church. This great city in verse 8 is not the holy city of verse 2. In this book, that leaves only one other choice — **the great city in verse 8 is Rome**.

But, wait, some will say. Verse 8 doesn't end with the word Sodom. The verse describes the great city as a city “which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.” Jerusalem was where Jesus was crucified.

Doesn't that mean this great city is Jerusalem rather than Rome? No, for several reasons.

First, the second half of verse 8 is a **description** of the great city rather than an **identification** of the great city. How do we know that? Because if it were an identification, we would have a big problem — which of the three locations (two cities and one nation) would we use to identify the great city? It is Sodom? Is it Egypt? Is it Jerusalem?

Second, note the word translated “**spiritually**” in the KJV translation of verse 8 — “which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.” The ESV says, “the great city that **symbolically** is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.” The RSV says, “the great city which is **allegorically** called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.” The Greek word is *pneumatikos*, which has the root word *pneuma*, which means “spirit.” The KJV translation of “spiritually” is the better translation; that is what the word means. The text is not saying that it is giving us a symbol for the first time in verse 8; we know that is not the case. We have seen many, many symbols so far in our study of this book, and we are expecting to see symbols here in verse 8, so there is no need for the text to wave a sign saying that we are seeing a symbol here. In fact, we must be seeing symbols here. Why? Because the great city cannot **literally** be Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem. So what does the word “spiritually” mean in verse 8? Let's look at the one other place in the Bible where the word appears.

*1 Corinthians 2:14 — But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are **spiritually** discerned.*

The word really just means “not physically.” The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God because they are not physically discerned — and that is all the natural man is focused on, the physical things. I think that is all the text is saying here in verse 8 — the great city is not physically like Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem — but it is spiritually like these cities.

Those who identify the great city with Jerusalem say that only Sodom and Egypt are being compared “spiritually” to the great city. They say those two cities are the descriptions, but they say Jerusalem is the identification. But there's a little word in verse 8 that causes a big problem for that theory. Do you see it? “Where **also** our Lord was crucified.” The text does not say “where

our Lord was crucified,” but it says, “where **also** our Lord was crucified.” As I read verse 8, that word “also” suggests that the final phrase should also fall under the umbrella of the word “spiritually.”

But let’s assume for a moment that the word “spiritually” in verse 8 applies **only** to Sodom and Egypt, and let’s assume that the phrase “where also our Lord was crucified” at the end of the verse was intended to be taken literally. (I don’t think that is the case, but let’s assume it is for a moment.) Does it follow even then that the great city is Jerusalem? **No**. Sodom was a city, but what about Egypt? Was Egypt a city? No. Egypt was a nation. In what nation was the Lord crucified? The Roman empire. Jerusalem was a part of the Roman empire when Jesus was crucified. If Egypt is a nation in verse 8, then why couldn’t the phrase “where also our Lord was crucified” also be pointing to a nation?

Is there any other support for the view that the phrase “where also our Lord was crucified” is pointing to the Roman empire rather than to Jerusalem? Yes. Jesus was not crucified **in** Jerusalem but was crucified **near** Jerusalem.

*John 19:20 — This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was **nigh** to the city.*

*Hebrews 12:12 — Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered **without the gate**.*

That’s not to say that it would necessarily be wrong to say that Jesus was crucified **in** Jerusalem, because loosely that is correct. But for those who insist that verse 8 is **literally** describing Jerusalem, I have to ask why their rigid literalism seems to end just short of John 19:20 and Hebrews 12:12!

The third reason we know that the great city in verse 8 is not Jerusalem is that the description in verse 8 does not make sense for Jerusalem. How was Jerusalem like Sodom? How was Jerusalem like Egypt?

Those who say this book is all about Jerusalem rather than Rome almost always start their argument here in verse 8 — and in my experience they usually end their argument here as well. I might be tempted to say they would have a point if verse 8 were the only verse in the book — but that is not true. Why? Because **even if taken alone**, verse 8 is enough to know that the great city is not literally Jerusalem. Sodom and Egypt are descriptions of Rome, not of Jerusalem. Rome, like Sodom, was a center of iniquity and sexual sin. Rome, like Egypt, oppressed and enslaved God’s people.

The fourth reason we know that the great city in verse 8 is not Jerusalem is that when this book was written Jerusalem was not a great city. Instead, Jerusalem was a destroyed city. (In fact, Jerusalem had not been a great city for quite some time prior to its destruction in AD 70!) When we get to Revelation 17:10, we will see that the book of Revelation was written during the reign of Vespasian, and the descriptions in Chapters 2-3 suggest it was late in the reign of Vespasian. That means that Jerusalem was destroyed about a decade before John received this vision on Patmos.

The fifth reason we know that the great city is not Jerusalem is that the word “Jerusalem” is not found in verse 8. Yes, Jerusalem was where (or, more precisely, *near* where) Jesus was crucified — but verse 8 does not name Jerusalem. Why? Why does verse 8 not just say, “which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt and Jerusalem”? Why does the text use the phrase “where also our Lord was crucified” instead of just naming Jerusalem as it does with Sodom and Egypt”? Why? Because the city in focus here is Rome, not Jerusalem — and (unlike with Sodom and Egypt) the text needs to explain how Rome is spiritually like old Jerusalem. The phrase at the end of the verse 8 does that. How? In at least two ways.

First, the phrase “where also our Lord was crucified” is a reminder of the wicked hands that crucified Christ — those hands were not Jewish hands, they were Roman hands.

Acts 2:23 — Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.

But second, for the first century Christians facing persecution, the phrase “where also our Lord was crucified” is a reminder of something Jesus had said.

*Matthew 10:24-28 — The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household? Fear them not therefore: for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known. What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops. **And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the***

soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Jesus knew all about Roman persecution! Jesus was crucified by the Romans, and the followers of Jesus should expect no better from Roman hands. “The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord.” The phrase at the end of verse 8 is a reminder of that fact.

One more point about the reference to Jerusalem in verse 8 — the appearance of Jerusalem in verse 8 may be yet another instance of the symbolic “two” that we have been seeing all throughout the text. How? **Because Jerusalem was two cities** — the old Jerusalem we see here in verse 8, and the new Jerusalem we will see in Revelation 21:2 — the “heavenly Jerusalem” of Hebrews 12:22.

I will admit that many commentaries disagree with me on this verse, but that has been true about almost every verse we have studied so far! And, I should add, not all commentators disagree with me here.

Lenski: Here Jerusalem is to be taken ideally, as the headquarters of all anti-Christianity. The actual city became such a symbol when it crucified Christ and never repented and was then razed to the ground.

Hailey: John sees this great city as a spiritual Sodom in its moral depravity, as an Egypt holding all people in bondage to lust and sin, and as a Jerusalem that rejected truth and put to death the author of truth.

There are many who identify the great city with Jerusalem, but in my opinion that identification just doesn't fit with the context of this book. If the villain in this book is Rome, then why would God include a discourse about the judgment of Jerusalem at the hands of that great villain? And why would those seven churches in Asia be all that concerned about the judgment of Jerusalem at the hands of Rome, the very power who was persecuting them? How would Rome's destruction of Jerusalem provide any comfort to Christians being persecuted by Rome? It might even have the opposite effect — “You're worried about Rome? You should be. Look at what it did to Jerusalem! You're worried that you've been forgotten by God? You should be. He may be punishing you at the hands of Rome just like he's punishing Jerusalem at the hands of Rome.”

Yes, when you focus on a verse here and a verse there, some of them could fit the destruction of Jerusalem. But when you step back and look at those verses

in their context, I think you will discover that from that perspective they fit Rome much better. Every description of the villain in this book fits Rome perfectly, and this description is no exception. The great city pictured here is Rome.

We have been focused for quite awhile just on verse 8. Let's move the camera back a bit and look at verse 8 in the context of the entire chapter.

God measured his people in verse 1 so that he would know who was and who was not on his side. In verse 2, we saw that those outside the church would, for a temporary period, be allowed to trample the church. But in verses 3-6, we see that God would protect and sustain the church so that the church could carry out its mission to proclaim the gospel. History tells us that the church continued to grow even under fierce persecution. And the persecution was fierce — verse 7 shows the two witnesses, representing the church, being killed by the beast from the pit. And that is where we are when verse 8 begins — the dead bodies of the two witnesses, the church, are lying dead in the street of the great city, Rome. Things look pretty bad for the church — but things are not what they seem! Verse 11 is coming! But first we need to look at verses 9-10.