

Homiletics Analysis: Revelation 11

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Revelation 11 opens with a measuring of the temple and the exclusion of the outer court, given over to the nations for forty-two months (vv. 1–2). Two witnesses are then commissioned to prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth, described in terms drawn from Moses and Elijah — empowered to shut the sky, turn water to blood, and strike the earth with plagues (vv. 3–6). When their testimony is complete, the beast from the abyss kills them, and their bodies lie unburied in the great city (called “Sodom,” “Egypt,” and “where the Lord was crucified”) while the world celebrates (vv. 7–10). After three and a half days, the breath of life from God enters them, they stand up, and they ascend to heaven in a cloud while their enemies watch — accompanied by a great earthquake that kills seven thousand and drives the survivors to give glory to God (vv. 11–13). The chapter closes with the seventh trumpet (vv. 15–19): loud voices in heaven declare that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever,” the twenty-four elders worship, and the heavenly temple is opened, revealing the ark of the covenant, with lightning, thunder, hail, and an earthquake.

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to assure a suffering, embattled church that faithful witness — even witness that ends in apparent defeat and death — is neither wasted nor final. The resurrection and vindication of the two witnesses enact in miniature what the whole book declares: the world’s triumph over the church is always temporary, God’s purposes in witness cannot be extinguished, and the kingdom that looks defeated is the kingdom that inherits all things. The chapter’s close with the seventh trumpet functions as a spoiler built into the narrative — the end is already declared before the remaining bowls and plagues are unveiled, so the church endures knowing the verdict is already rendered.

Subject Sentence:

The church’s faithful witness is divinely protected, ultimately vindicated, and issued in the eternal kingdom of Christ.

Primary Claim:

God is assuring His church that their witness under persecution will not be silenced — not by opposition, not by apparent death — because the one who raises the dead holds both their testimony and their future; the kingdom is already His.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Temple Measuring (vv. 1–2)

The most significant interpretive divergence in this chapter concerns the identity of the temple in verses 1–2. Dispensational interpreters take this as a literal rebuilt temple in Jerusalem during a future tribulation period, with the outer court’s trampling signifying Gentile military occupation of a physical space. This reading requires importing the Israel/Church distinction into the symbolism, treating the measuring as divine protection of a literal structure and the forty-two months as a literal future time period.

The Reformed and broader amillennial reading is preferable for several reasons. Throughout Revelation, John’s temple imagery is consistently applied to the people of God, not to a building (cf. Rev. 3:12; 7:15; 21:22). Paul uses temple language for the church (1 Cor. 3:16–17; Eph. 2:19–22). The measuring in Ezekiel 40–48 — the clear Old Testament background — functions as a symbol of divine protection and restoration, not architectural survey. The outer court given to the nations most naturally refers to the church’s exposure to external suffering and worldly opposition, while the inner sanctuary (God’s true worshippers) is spiritually secured. The forty-two months (= 1,260 days = time, times, half a time) is the period of the church’s existence between the first and second comings — the whole era of witness under pressure. The Dispensational reading *acknowledges* a genuine concern for the text’s specificity but *overreaches* by literalizing what Revelation’s own symbolic register consistently treats figuratively.

The Two Witnesses (vv. 3–12)

Three major readings of the two witnesses exist: (1) literal end-times figures, possibly the return of Moses and Elijah; (2) a specific duo of historical prophets (Enoch and Elijah, on the basis of their non-death, is a patristic view); (3) a corporate symbol for the witnessing church.

The corporate/symbolic reading is most convincing. The two-witness requirement derives from Deuteronomy 19:15 — the number establishes legally sufficient testimony. “Two” signals completeness of witness, not a headcount of individuals. The Mosaic and Elijan characteristics are deliberately distributed *across* the two witnesses together, suggesting the figure represents the whole prophetic tradition embodied in the church’s proclamation. The witnesses are described as “the two olive trees and the two lampstands” (v. 4), directly invoking Zechariah 4 — where the olive trees signify the Spirit-empowered channels of God’s activity among His people. The lampstands in Revelation already stand for churches (Rev. 1:20). The witnesses’ death and resurrection parallel Christ’s own pattern and mirror

the fate of the whole church under persecution — making the corporate reading not merely plausible but structurally essential to the chapter’s argument.

The literal-individual readings should be *refuted* not because individual martyrs don’t matter but because they reduce a deliberately corporate symbol to a biographical curiosity, evacuating the passage of its direct claim on every suffering congregation.

The Great City (v. 8)

The identification of “the great city” as Sodom, Egypt, *and* where the Lord was crucified generates debate. Some restrict this to first-century Jerusalem (citing the crucifixion reference and noting Sodom/Egypt as metaphorical labels for Jerusalem’s apostasy, as in Isaiah 1:10 and Ezekiel 16:46). Others read it as Rome. The Reformed reading, consistent with the broader symbolic register of Revelation, is that “the great city” functions as a universal symbol for the world-system in its hostility to God — any city, in any era, that kills the prophets. The crucifixion reference grounds it historically in Jerusalem but explodes it symbolically to encompass all human rebellion. This is not indeterminacy — it is Revelation’s characteristic technique of layering historical anchors with universal application.

The Seventh Trumpet (vv. 15–19)

The seventh trumpet’s declaration — “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” — is sometimes read as exclusively future (Dispensational: announcing events still chronologically ahead). The Reformed reading is that this is a proleptic declaration: the trumpet announces as accomplished what is certain from the perspective of God’s eternal decree. The interlude structure of Revelation (seals → interlude → trumpets → interlude → bowls) consistently provides heavenly certainty before earthly suffering — the church is given the verdict before the remaining woes. The present-tense certainty of the declaration (“has become”) is not confused narrative chronology; it is the apocalyptic grammar of faith.

Key Canonical Support

- **Zechariah 4:1–14** — The two olive trees and lampstand vision directly supplies the imagery of verses 3–4; Zechariah’s vision concerns Spirit-empowered witness through God’s appointed channels (“not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit”), establishing the corporate-witness reading.
- **Deuteronomy 19:15** — The two-witness legal requirement grounds the number “two” as establishing sufficient testimony before God, not a literal headcount — supporting the corporate reading of the witnesses as the church’s complete and legally valid proclamation.

- **Ezekiel 37:1–14** — The valley of dry bones — breath of life entering the slain and their standing up — directly parallels the witnesses’ resurrection (v. 11), grounding the pattern in God’s sovereign reversal of death for His people.
- **Daniel 7:13–14, 27** — “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord” (v. 15) draws from Daniel’s vision of the Son of Man receiving dominion; the seventh trumpet declares fulfilled what Daniel’s vision foresaw, grounding the certainty of Christ’s universal reign.
- **Acts 1:8–11** — The witnesses’ ascension in a cloud (v. 12) deliberately echoes the ascension of Christ; the church’s vindication mirrors and participates in its Lord’s own pattern of death → resurrection → exaltation → return.

Aim:

To demonstrate that faithful witness under opposition — however costly — is neither wasted nor finally defeated, because the God who vindicates His witnesses has already declared the outcome of history.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
11:1–2	John told to measure the temple and altar and worshippers; outer court excluded, given to nations for 42 months	Measuring = divine protection; outer court = exposure to worldly opposition; 42 months = the whole inter-advent period of witness under pressure
11:3–4	Two witnesses commissioned to prophesy 1,260 days in sackcloth; identified as two olive trees and two lampstands	Sackcloth = prophetic mourning; olive trees/lampstands draws from Zech. 4; 1,260 days = same period as 42 months
11:5–6	Fire from witnesses’ mouths devours enemies; power to shut sky, turn water to blood, strike earth with plagues	Elijah typology (1 Kings 17–18); Moses typology (Exod. 7–12); witness has divine authority and cannot be prematurely silenced
11:7	When testimony is complete, beast from the abyss wages war and kills	“When they have finished” — their death cannot occur until their witness is

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	them	complete; sovereignty over the timing
11:8–10	Bodies lie unburied in “the great city” (= Sodom/Egypt/where the Lord was crucified); world celebrates and exchanges gifts	Greatest possible dishonor (unburied); world’s premature triumph; “great city” = universal symbol of world-system in rebellion
11:11–12	After 3½ days, breath of life from God enters them; they stand; great fear falls; they ascend in cloud; enemies watch	Echoes Ezek. 37 (breath/standing); echoes Christ’s resurrection and ascension; vindication before the watching world
11:13	Great earthquake; 7,000 killed; survivors terrified and give glory to God	Mixed response: judgment and a remnant turning; 7,000 may echo Elijah’s 7,000 who had not bowed to Baal (1 Kings 19:18)
11:14	Second woe has passed; third woe coming soon	Structural marker; urgency maintained
11:15	Seventh trumpet sounds; loud voices: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever”	Proleptic declaration; the verdict of history announced before the bowls; Christus Victor language
11:16–18	Twenty-four elders fall and worship; praise God who has begun to reign; nations raged, wrath has come, time to reward servants and destroy destroyers	The elders’ hymn names both judgment and reward; “the time has come” language — eschatological certainty
11:19	Temple of God opened in heaven; ark of the covenant seen; lightning, rumblings, thunder, earthquake, hail	Ark = covenant faithfulness; theophanic signs = divine presence and judgment; heaven’s assurance grounds earth’s endurance

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	11:1–2	The Protected Temple: The Church Secured in the Midst of Exposure
2	11:3–6	The Commissioned Witnesses: The Church’s Testimony Is Divinely Authorized and Cannot Be Silenced
3	11:7–10	The Apparent Defeat: The World Celebrates What It Mistakes for Victory
4	11:11–13	The Vindication: God Raises His Witnesses and the World Watches
5	11:14–19	The Seventh Trumpet: The Kingdom Is Already His — the Verdict Declared Before the Final Woes

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The church’s faithful witness is divinely protected, ultimately vindicated, and issued in the eternal kingdom of Christ.

Primary Claim: God is assuring His church that their witness under persecution will not be silenced — not by opposition, not by apparent death — because the one who raises the dead holds both their testimony and their future; the kingdom is already His.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what “defeat” looks like for the church. (*Mind/belief*) The world’s celebration over the witnesses’ bodies (vv. 9–10) is not the verdict — it is a premature party. Christians in contexts of institutional marginalization, cultural mockery, or outright persecution are tempted to read the world’s apparent triumph over the church as evidence that God has abandoned the field. This passage dismantles that reading. The witnesses’ death is not the end of the story; it is the condition for their vindication. Where the church seems most defeated — its testimony silenced, its members dishonored — God is not absent; He is setting the stage. Stop reading the world’s scorecard as final.

2. Grieve over the church's compromised witness without despairing of it.

(Affections/worship) The witnesses prophesy in sackcloth — the garment of mourning. Their witness is not triumphalist, polished, or celebrated. It is costly, sorrowful, and offered in an atmosphere of opposition. The church that reads this passage should feel both the weight of what faithful testimony costs and the freedom from needing the world's applause. There is a holy grief that belongs to true witness — grief over sin, over lostness, over the condition of the world — and the congregation that has lost this grief has already accommodated itself to the culture it is called to prophesy against. Let the sackcloth be recovered.

3. Witness faithfully in your specific sphere until the testimony is complete.

(Will/behavior) The witnesses cannot be killed until “they have finished their testimony” (v. 7). The sovereignty that governs when is the same sovereignty that governs whether. This means that each Christian's witness in their home, workplace, neighborhood, and church has a divinely appointed duration — it is not futile, not accidental, and not subject to cancellation by opposition. The application is not passive fatalism but active, specific obedience: what testimony have you been commissioned to give, and are you giving it? Who in your sphere needs to hear what you have been given to say?

4. Worship the God who has already declared the outcome. *(Affections/worship)* The seventh trumpet (vv. 15–19) does not announce a future possibility — it declares a present certainty. The twenty-four elders fall and worship because the kingdom is already His. The church that worships under pressure is not generating optimism from human resources — it is aligning its affections with what is actually true. Corporate worship in a suffering church is an act of prophetic defiance: it announces, before the world and the powers, that the throne is not vacant, the verdict is not in doubt, and the one who reigns is the Lamb who was slain. Worship is not escapism from suffering; it is the church's most politically charged act.

5. Do not mistake the church's current cultural marginalization for permanent defeat.

(Mind/belief) The three and a half days of the witnesses' apparent defeat (v. 9) is shorter than the 1,260 days of their testimony — the proportion matters. The period of the world's gloating is brief; the period of the church's witness is long; and the vindication that follows is eternal. Western Christians tempted toward despair over the church's declining cultural influence should hold this proportion in view. Marginalization is not the same as defeat. The church has been buried before — by empire, by persecution, by its own failures — and the breath of life from God has entered it again. The current moment is not the exception to the pattern; it is the pattern. The witnesses always look dead before they stand.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance:

Revelation 11 teaches that God’s sovereignty over history extends specifically to the church’s witness — its commission, its duration, its apparent defeat, and its ultimate vindication. The chapter refuses to allow suffering or death to be the final word about the church’s mission. More fundamentally, it teaches that history has a throne at its center — “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” is not a hope but a declaration — and that the Christ who rules is the same Christ who was crucified where His witnesses are now killed. The resurrection of the witnesses is not a magical reversal; it is a participation in and extension of Christ’s own pattern. God’s faithfulness to His witnesses flows from His covenant faithfulness, visually anchored in the chapter’s final image: the ark of the covenant, seen in the opened heavenly temple, confirming that every promise made to His people is secured in the heavenly reality behind the earthly turbulence.

Reformed Theological Significance

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This chapter powerfully displays the Reformed understanding of the church as the instrument of God’s covenant purposes in the inter-advent age — not triumphalist, not accommodated, but bearing witness under the cross until the kingdom is consummated. The measuring of the temple (vv. 1–2) illustrates the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints: the inner sanctuary of the true church is divinely secured even while the outer court of earthly experience remains exposed to opposition. The witnesses’ commission to prophesy until their testimony is complete reflects the Reformed understanding of vocation — God’s sovereign appointment governs the when and the how of every believer’s witness. Most significantly, the seventh trumpet’s proleptic declaration (“the kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord”) grounds the Reformed understanding of the already/not-yet: the decisive victory has been won at the cross and resurrection; the remaining history is the outworking of that accomplished reality. This is not naïve triumphalism but eschatological realism — the church endures not because things are getting better but because the verdict is already rendered and the resurrection is already underway.

Main Takeaway

Your witness will not be silenced, and your death — if it comes in faithful testimony — is not your defeat. The God who raised the witnesses raises His own. The kingdom that looks conquered is the kingdom that inherits all things. The seventh trumpet has already sounded in heaven: *the kingdom is His*. Live and speak accordingly.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Reducing the two witnesses to a biographical end-times puzzle.** The most common homiletical failure with this passage is spending the entire sermon speculating about whether the two witnesses are Elijah and Enoch, or Moses and Elijah, and when exactly they will appear during a future tribulation period. This treats a corporate symbol as a biographical prophecy and evacuates the passage of its direct claim on every Christian's life. The two witnesses are the church in its prophetic witness — the sermon must land there, not leave the congregation as spectators to a future event.
- **Dispensational literalism evacuating present application.** Closely related: when the temple, the forty-two months, and the witnesses are all pushed into a future tribulation period, the passage becomes irrelevant to any congregation that exists before that era. This is precisely what the Dispensational reading produces, and it is precisely what the text refuses — this passage is written to suffering churches in the first century and every century to assure them of their witness's validity and God's protection *now*. Literalism that delays the claim into the future is not faithful exegesis; it is avoidance.
- **Preaching the witnesses' power without the witnesses' sackcloth.** The fire from their mouths and the plague-stopping authority make for vivid preaching, but without the sackcloth — the mourning, the cost, the prophetic grief — the sermon becomes a power-fantasy rather than a theology of the cross. The witnesses are not celebrated; they are killed. The dominant note of their ministry is not triumph but costly fidelity. Preachers who emphasize only the power language will produce triumphalism; the sackcloth is load-bearing.
- **Skipping the world's celebration (vv. 9–10) as too dark.** The three-day gloating of the world over the witnesses' bodies is uncomfortable and preachers sometimes rush past it. But this is precisely the pastoral heart of the passage — it validates the experience of congregations that feel mocked, marginalized, and dismissed by a culture that is celebrating over what it perceives as the church's decline. The passage names what the church feels before it declares what God does. Skipping the darkness of verses 9–10 robs the resurrection of verses 11–12 of its weight.
- **Treating the seventh trumpet as merely future.** The proleptic declaration of verse 15 — “the kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord” — is meant to fund present endurance, not simply to describe a coming event. A sermon that treats this as exclusively future chronology misses its present pastoral force entirely. The church is meant to live *now* as those who have heard this declaration and are aligning their lives with its certainty. The verdict has been rendered; the church's calling is to live in light of it before it is visibly consummated.

- **Allegorizing the chapter's particulars into shapeless encouragement.** The opposite error from over-literalizing: reducing Revelation 11 to a vague "God wins in the end, so don't worry." The chapter's specific images — the measuring, the sackcloth, the unburied bodies, the breath of life, the cloud-ascension — each carry precise freight drawn from specific Old Testament texts and together construct a carefully argued theology of witness. Preachers should work the specific images rather than flattening them into generic comfort. Specificity is not pedantry; it is faithfulness to how the text is actually arguing.