

99-03-21a

Let's continue our worship this morning by turning to Revelation chapter 11. Revelation chapter 11. The connection of this passage to our study in Genesis will become obvious as we go forward.

The title for this chapter that's supplied by the New King James is The Times of the Gentiles, which will conclude in 42 months. John says in Revelation 11, 1 Then I was given a reed like a measuring rod, and the angel stood, saying, Rise and measure the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship there. But leave out the court which is outside the temple, and do not measure it, for it has been given to the Gentiles, and they will tread the holy city under foot for 42 months.

Of course, there's an awful lot. You could spend a couple of weeks just on those two verses. But the portion we're interested in follows.

And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy 1,260 days clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth. And if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies.

And if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner. These have power to shut heaven so that no rain falls in the days of their prophecy. And they have power over waters to turn them to blood and to strike the earth with all plagues as often as they desire.

When they finish their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, overcome them, and kill them. And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified. Then those from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations will see their dead bodies three and a half days and not allow their dead bodies to be put into graves.

And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth. Now after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, Come up here.

And they ascended to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies saw them. In the same hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. In the earthquake seven thousand people were killed, and the rest were afraid and gave glory to the God of heaven.

The second woe was passed. Behold, the third woe is coming quickly. Of course, any passage of the word of God is fraught with meaning, or I should say freighted with meaning.

And there are an awful lot of questions that might be raised just in the reading of this chapter. Unfortunately, we're not in this portion of the word of God for a detailed study. But you will notice that there are two very obvious similarities here to what we have just seen when we finished our study of Genesis 19.

First of all, the city of Sodom is mentioned, and secondly, there are two witnesses who have the power to bring destruction. There are also some very distinct differences in the purpose and the mission and the duration of the stay of the witnesses in the two passages. We cannot help but notice and connect these passages as we go through Genesis.

The primary reference here also reminds us, and that is to Sodom in verse 8, also reminds us of our excursion over into Judges chapter 19, where we saw that the parallel account of the traveling man with his concubine who goes and stays in the Benjamite town of Gibeah, not to be confused with Gibeon or the Gibeonites, who were the hewers of wood and haulers of water because they fooled the Israelites with their moldy bread and their worn-out sandals. Gibeah is the area from which Saul's family comes later on. But this is within the land of Israel.

This is a town ostensibly composed of believers. And this terrible tragedy happens in Gibeah where the men of the city come and demand to have their way with this traveler from out of town, much as the men of Sodom demand to have their way with the two messengers from God in Genesis 19. And the tragedy is, the comparison of those two passages shows that the men of Israel, who are the recipients of the deliverance of God, the grace of God, the oracles of God, the ministry of the prophets of God, can sink to the level and duplicate in many respects the behavior and the depravity that is so rampant in the city of Sodom, in which God has so clearly demonstrated His attitude about in the record of Genesis 19.

And the blatant disregard and apathetic attitude toward God and His word and His will evidenced in the lives of believers is what is at stake. We have a similar situation here where these two witnesses will prophesy for one half of the period of the 70th week of Daniel. We know that that's a seven-year period.

If you multiply seven times 365 days, you get something on the order of 520 days. I haven't done the math lately, but this period of prophecy here in 11.3 is 1,260 days, which is half of that period of time. So they're here on the earth and they prophesy, and of course they are delivering the word of God as they prophesy To reinforce that, as God has done many times in the past, there are signs and wonders.

There are judgments that are brought through the mouths of these prophets. Of course the identity of these two witnesses has been much discussed down through history since the time that this book was written. One of the common identifications is that they are Moses and Elijah, and the reason is because of the power that is described in verse 6. They have the power to shut heaven so that no rain falls.

This was a prominent feature of Elijah's ministry in Israel. He prayed and the heavens were shut up and they didn't open until he prayed again. They also have the power over waters to turn them to blood.

There's a very obvious reference there to the plagues when Moses was in the process of implementing God's deliverance of Israel and striking the earth with all plagues as often as they desire. This power accompanies the testimony that they deliver, the word that they present. Once that testimony is finished, at the end of the 1,260 days, they have been invincible.

They are unapproachable. No one can touch them. It reminds us of the earlier days of Jesus' ministry.

There were those who sought to kill him after he read the Isaiah scroll and everyone said, what gracious speech and so forth. Who does this guy think he is? And then they sought to kill him. They were going to cast him off a cliff.

They wanted to stone him on several different occasions. The scribes and Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus, but he would pass through their midst untouched and unharmed. The two messengers in Sodom with Lot put blindness on that crowd so that they can't fulfill their desire to enter the house and to take the two messengers away.

But here, the invincibility of these two prophets, these two witnesses, ends at the end of their ministry. It reminds us of John the Baptist. John preached.

John foretold the coming of the Messiah, and so forth. And once his ministry was complete, God allowed his life to be ended by outside forces. But not until his ministry was finished and until the promised Messiah had come.

Here in verse 7, when they finished their testimony, the beast that descends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, overcome them, and kill them. This, of course, is by the permission of God. God allows this to take place.

It seems like an evil thing. It seems like a big victory for the beast. Everyone celebrates.

They actually declare a Christmas, so to speak, on this occasion. People, in verse 10, will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another. They say, like, deck the halls with boughs of holly, let's all exchange presents.

Ding-dong, the wicked prophets are dead. That kind of thing. Because they tormented those who dwell on the earth.

This is the maximum level of reinforcement of the convicting message of their testimony from God. And if people want to try to turn off their message and want to ignore it, they can't ignore it. There are plagues, water turning to blood, famine induced by the withholding of rain.

These people have to pay attention. There's nobody that can say, we didn't know what was going on. We didn't get the word.

If you want to talk about ignorance being no excuse, nobody here will even be ignorant. That issue drops out of sight, because everyone will know. These men are going to prophesy for three and a half years, twelve hundred and sixty days.

And they will have the power to make sure everyone gets the point. And it's going to be torture. It's going to be torment for the people on the earth, because they don't want to accept that message.

And when these two prophets have their invincibility removed and their ability to strike anyone who approaches them with devouring fire, as it describes in verse five, these people are going to be so happy about it, they won't want to bury them. They don't want to drag the corpses out of sight. I went to a wax museum one time.

I had spent part of my growing up years in Claremore. Claremore, if you've ever been there, is not a very large town. But we had Long's Historical Wax Museum down there.

It's not there anymore. But it was in a shabby state of disrepair. It was an old, broken down wax museum.

In fact, it was so comical to go in there and see. This was in the late sixties, early seventies. There were some old, broken wax representations of the Beatles in there.

Actually, Ringo had fallen over backward. There were holes in his drums. I think John Lennon's arm had fallen off.

Their wigs were on crooked. It was really tacky. They sort of were surprised if anybody even came there for admission.

I never saw a crowd. I never saw cars in the parking lot. They would open it and let you go through.

But I think it was a tax write-off for somebody that it was even still open. But I say all that to say I went in there and they had this sort of chamber of horrors where gruesome things were represented in wax. One of the things they had there, of course, I thought part of it was horrifying outside.

They had a wax representation of the actress Hedy Lamarr. This tells you how old the wax museum was. They had a representation of Hedy Lamarr.

Nobody even knew who she was. She was a ghastly sight by this time in her wax career. But you pass on by Hedy Lamarr, who probably never looked that bad even after she died.

Then you go into this chamber of horrors. One of the things they had in there, they had a coffin. In it they had the mutilated corpse of Mussolini.

If you know the history of what happened toward the closing days of the prominence of the dictators in World War II, Mussolini was basically seized by the mobs. I think he was shot, stabbed, strangled, hacked up. He was in real bad shape.

They had a wax representation of this. This was my question, among many others. Why would anybody put this in a wax museum? I don't know what the antiquity of this particular museum was, but I think it was probably put there in the 50s.

In the euphoria of our victory in World War II, people thought this is what happens to the people that throw in with the Third Reich. These are the enemies. These are the evil ones.

Here's their ignominious end. We're going to make sure our children remember this, that this is what happens when you take the evil path. Here's how Mussolini ended up.

I suspect there may have been sort of an element of gloating, and we'll make an object lesson out of these guys. So you've got your kids trooping through here, and you look down and here's this gruesome wax representation of the mutilated corpse of Mussolini. Well, this is what happens to the two witnesses.

You can imagine, even with our present-day technology, what this is going to be like. Worldwide satellite coverage. I don't know, at the point that this happens, maybe they'll have holographic TV sets and things, but this is going to be, right now, if something happens, it's splashed all over the world.

The train wreck they had recently, the gals in Yosemite that were found in the trunk of their car off in the wilderness, that's a remote area, but everybody in the world has seen the pictures of that burned-out car and the flatbed truck carrying it away and so forth. So this is going to be splashed around. They're going to gloat.

They're going to celebrate. There's going to be glee and the exchanging of gifts. You can celebrate a lot of things, but when's the last time you said, let's send presents to each other? Let's have Christmas in the middle of the year because this is so great.

This is a reflection of attitude, but here's the point. Where does this take place? Where

do these bodies lie open and desecrated? We all saw the American GI's body dragged through the streets overseas and what a horrifying sight that was. This is going to go on for three and a half days worldwide.

Where does this take place? It's the ultimate disgrace to the people of God because in fact the passage won't even mention the name of the town directly. It calls it Sodom and Egypt, but it does identify for us it's Jerusalem. It's the city of David.

It's the place where God chose to put His presence. It's the place where the temple stood. It's the place where David moved the tabernacle and where Solomon built the temple and where the glory of God filled it, where God took up residence in the Holy of Holies.

In this same city, men who bring the message of God to the earth are going to lie. Their bodies will lie desecrated for these three and a half days. And there is no worse epithet that can be put upon a believer than Sodom.

This is the condemnation of Israel in Judges 19 where they duplicate in great detail the actions of the Sodomites. And here in Revelation 11 you have the same thing. It's a tremendous warning.

Why is it put here in Scripture? Why are we told about this? Why is it in our Bible? Why is it in our New Testament? This is something that's future. Why do we need to know about the two witnesses? We don't plan on being here, do we? We're going to be celebrating the union of the bride and the groom. The lamb and his spotless church.

So why do we need to know this? Same reason we have Judges 19. Same reason we have Genesis 19. Because it is a warning to us that you can't take things for granted just because you're a believer.

Just because you have experienced the power of God, the deliverance of God, the presence of God. You can go back to Egypt. You can emulate Sodom.

Egypt is the land of bondage. Sodom is the land of depravity. Both of them are judged in a very graphic and violent way by God.

And it stands there in the Scripture for our instruction. And you have that exhortation. Let any man who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

And even in the midst of thinking that you're defending the faith or that you're promoting the truth, beware. Take heed. Our first responsibility is to ourselves.

And we always forget that. We get our eyes on other people. We get to looking around, falling into the trap of Romans 1 and 2 where we see things going on around us and we say, that's wrong.

We point the finger, forgetting about the three that are pointing back at us. And this is the great fallacy, as we've pointed out many times in a lot of our modern Christianity. We are so busy looking at others, worrying about the changes that need to be made in others, what they ought to be doing, what they ought to be thinking, how they ought to be living, that we neglect, a lot of times unconsciously, our own responsibility before the Lord to not fall back into our former ways, to not return to the vomit of our unregenerate lives.

And it's an easy type of blindness to fall into. This is what is going to happen to Abraham in Genesis chapter 20. If you return now over to Genesis, this is a fascinating chapter, Genesis chapter 20, because we have what seems to be a repeat of something that happened eight chapters earlier.

Back in 12, in 12.1, we had Abraham leaving his kindred and people and going forth to the promised land, and before the chapter is finished, he's down in Egypt, lying about his wife and getting expelled by Pharaoh. Now in chapter 20, after all of the appearances of God, the passing of the smoking pot and the burning torch between the pieces of the covenant sacrificed animal, the walking with God on the hills there, up north, looking out over the smoke of the burning region of Sodom and everything else, all of these other things, and in particular, you remember that God himself visited Abraham, accepted Abraham's hospitality, partook of a meal outside Abraham's tent, spoke a promise to Abraham, reiterated a promise that he had already spoken to Abraham, but he spoke at this time in Sarah's presence. We're not real sure if Abraham had ever communicated to Sarah the things that God told him, but we know at this point that she hears it because she laughs.

But God, what are the specific words of what God said as he sat outside the tent flap in the early part of Genesis 18? He says in verse 10, I will certainly return to you according to the time of life or about this time next year, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son. He says again in verse 14, is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time, I will return to you. And you can either translate it according to the time of life or this time next year, Sarah shall have a son.

You get the idea when God says I will return to you. Think about this. You're sitting there.

God comes to you. You're living in a particular place. You're by the oak trees or the terebinth trees of Mamre.

God comes to you there and he says I'm going to come back. I'm going to return and fulfill the promise that I've made to you over these many years. Well, if that is a reality, if that's something that is prominent in your thinking, here's the Lord God of the universe has come down to me and sat with me in bodily form, partaken of food, revealed his will and the future of what's going to happen.

He says I'm going to come back real soon and your promise is going to be fulfilled. In principle, in theory, this would now be the fixed object around which you orient your life. God says he's going to come back in a year or very soon at this appointed time and the fulfillment of all of these covenant promises that he's been making to me over the years is going to take place.

God came to me here. I think I'll wait for him. I'm going to wait right here until he comes back.

I'm going to stay in this place of blessing. I'm going to stay in this place of fellowship. I'm going to stay in this place of communication from God, deliverance from danger, this place of communion with God until he comes back.

You have the terrible alternative. We've seen what happens when Lot leaves the place of blessing, leaves the place of communion with God and fellowship with believers who are in the center of God's will. He goes to Sodom.

We've just seen this horrible... Abraham himself has walked over to the hilltop and looked over and seen the smoke rising from the city. You have all of that as background to chapter 20, verse 1. Abraham journeyed from there to the south. Abraham left that place and went toward the south.

The south is the place of Egypt. The south is the place of his last failure. He's heading back in that direction again.

Why doesn't he wait? Is a year so long a time? It reminds you of what Jesus said to the disciples in Gethsemane. Could you not watch with me one hour? Could you not maintain your focus? Could you keep your concentration for one hour? All Abraham has to do is wait for the appointed time when God will return and Sarah will have a son. We aren't given the reason.

This is one of the contrasts with chapter 12. There's been some of this nonsensical, aberrant, scholarly analysis that tries to say this is just another form of the tradition. There was only one episode where Abraham called his wife his sister and got in trouble.

It's come to us in two different strands that have been incorporated. All this is nonsense. One of the contrasts with the first time this happened back in Genesis chapter 12 is there was a reason why Abraham left in chapter 12.

He comes to the land. He builds an altar at Bethel. But then there's a famine.

And there's a famine in the land. And Abraham says, I can't stay here. There's no sustenance.

I've got to go someplace where I can get some food. And so he leaves because there's a

famine. There's no mention of a famine in chapter 20, is there? There's no compelling reason for him to leave.

We're not told why he leaves. Apparently there was a compelling reason in his mind to leave. He's been living in this area for years now.

This is where he was when Lot got captured the first time. He had to go fight the coalition of kings. What possesses Abraham to leave this place? But he does.

He journeys from there to the south. And he dwells between Kadesh and Shur and stays in Virar. Without going into a whole lot of detail here, you can look these places up on the map.

This is outside the boundaries of the land of promise, just as Egypt is. And that's a similarity, is that both of these things take place outside the promised land. Abraham leaves his heritage.

He leaves the place of promise. In verse 2 it tells us, Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister. In chapter 12, we had an explanation of this.

He talks to Sarah first, and he says, You're beautiful. He kind of flatters Sarah. He says, Oh, you're so beautiful that when they see you, they'll kill me to get you.

So please say you are my sister. We assume that some of the same rationale is present here, but it's not detailed. We know that Abraham has done this before.

So we have a very short summary of what takes place. It just says, Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister. We figure, well, it must be for some of the same reasons.

But it's interesting because this is quite a few years later. We figure maybe 25 years or so have passed since the Genesis 12 episode. And the fact that Sarah's beauty is not mentioned again, you wonder, well, did that last 25 years kind of take its toll? What is the rationale? Why does Abraham fall back on this? He's just had a discussion with God in chapter 18 about the preservation of the righteous.

God will preserve the entire wicked city of Sodom if there are ten righteous people in it. What is Abraham worried about? That he's got to lie about the status between himself and Sarah. What is his fear? That the righteous will not be preserved? That something bad will happen? What is the motivation for this? We ask ourselves these questions because we've seen Abraham on this upward trend and he seems to really be at a peak, literally as well as figuratively, when he's dwelling there at Mamre.

And God Himself comes and communes with him. How many times has God come in bodily form and communed with someone? He is enjoying the friend of God status. And

yet here, without explanation, without introduction, without any compelling reason given to us in the Scripture, he has fallen back into the mire from which he first emerged under the grace of God.

How can this happen? It's just astonishing. The more you think about it, the more amazing it is. We like to think if God Himself walked into the living room here, if Jesus Christ appeared among us like He did among the disciples in the upper room after the resurrection, once we'd seen that, we'd be guaranteed hardcore believers for life.

We wouldn't stray from the path. We would lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily besets us and we'd be charged in the high ground. An appearance like that, a revelation direct, personal from God like that, that would cinch it.

How could you ever fall away from the faith after an experience like that? Well, here you go. And what it tells us is, it's not... And of course we have many other examples. You look at Israel after the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire and the parting of the Red Sea and water from the rock and all the manna from heaven and all the other amazing things that God does.

Eyewitnesses of these things, personal first-hand experience of these things falls away. And what it tells us is, it's not... We don't have a need for an experience. We have the need to commit to our relationship.

It's not a mountaintop experience. It's not a grand lightning bolt revelation that we need. We need daily dedication to what we already have, to the relationship we already have in Christ, with God.

There isn't any greater revelation than what God has already given to us in His Word and in His Spirit. It would not be a greater or a more powerful incentive if we saw God personally than what we already have with God revealing Himself personally through His Spirit and through His Word within us. And we tend to miss that.

We think, oh, if I could see a miracle, if I could have a personal sign from God of some sort. Well, we see over and over in the pages of Scripture, this is no guarantee. Peter traveled about with the Lord Jesus Christ, heard every word of His teaching for three years, and fell apart under pressure.

He saw the raising of the dead. He walked on the water Himself. He watched the bread multiply in His hands as He distributed it to the 5,000 and the 4,000.

You would think, boy, experiences like that, you would be permanently welded to the iron bar of God's way and God's will. Even if you're a copper wire, you'd be welded to the bar. You'd never bend again if you had an experience like that.

The Scripture tells us over and over again, we've got that. We have the word of prophecy

made more sure. We have the presence and the seal of the Holy Spirit in our souls.

That's as good as it gets. You can watch all the miracles you want. You can experience all the personal presence of God in bodily form that you want.

It doesn't get any better than what we already have. If what we already have is not sufficient to motivate us, none of these other things are going to be any better. We have those things, essentially, in God's Word and in God's Spirit within us.

And so we are without excuse. We can no more condemn Abraham for what he does in Genesis 20. We are equally condemnable when we fail the grace of God, when we fail to pursue the calling and the will of God that has been revealed to us because it is just as certain, it's just as sure as if we had had these experiences that Abraham, that Israel, that David, that Peter, and that others in the Scripture have had.

We're right up there with them. We've had the same experience of the grace of God and the revelation of God's presence and the understanding of God's will that they have had. It doesn't get any better than this.

So what's our excuse? But here's Abraham. Right after this experience with God, heading south, he leaves the place of communion with God. We don't even know why.

And he goes down to dwell in this other place and he stays in Gerar outside the land of promise. And he falls back into this old, it's an old habit. Why hasn't he done this in the intervening 20 or 25 years? Well, the occasion didn't come up, but he has sojourned once again.

He's now again an alien in a strange territory. He's once again in a situation that he was last in that long ago where he's gone and put himself under the sway. He's in the sovereign authority area of someone who's outside the land that God has promised to him.

He went there voluntarily. And once he's there, he says, oh, I'm in a situation where I'm in some... this is a challenge. This is a potential danger to me.

Well, this is what I did last time. I'll just do it again. And you get the idea that Abraham's just not thinking.

He's not cycling anything that he knows. He's just kind of in a knee-jerk mode here. Now, in verse 3, God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, Indeed, you are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife.

Because Abimelech, king of Gerar, had sent and taken Sarah. We found that out in verse 2. Same thing that Pharaoh did. Abimelech had not come near her, and he said, Lord, will you slay a righteous nation also? Did he not say to me, She is my sister? And she, even

she herself said, He is my brother.

In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands, I have done this. God said to him in a dream, Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart, for I also withheld you from sinning against me. Therefore, I did not let you touch her.

Now, therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours. There are quite a few extraordinary observations here, extraordinary circumstances here.

The first question, I don't know if this occurs to you, but it occurs to me, you've got this problem with Abraham. He goes in the wrong direction, he does the wrong thing, his wife is taken once again, shades of Egypt. Once Abimelech takes Sarah, Abraham doesn't act, he doesn't go and say, Well, let me explain.

He lets the status quo, he's right back where he was 25 years earlier. He's right back where he was eight chapters earlier, at the beginning of his pursuit of the path of God in his first great failure that's recorded in Scripture. Why does God appear to Abimelech and not to Abraham? Abraham is the man with the promises, Abraham is the man that was there by the tent, and God came to him and spoke and affirmed the promises and said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Well, he's hiding from Abraham what he's about to do here.

He's about to wipe out Abimelech and his whole household and his whole kingdom because of something Abraham has done. He doesn't go tell Abraham that. Why doesn't God appear to Abraham? Isn't he the hero of the story here, the protagonist? God goes to the pagan king.

Why? God appears to Abimelech in a dream. Now, we've generally observed in the past that when God speaks personally to someone, we figure they're a believer. Is Abimelech a believer? In verse 7, God says, Abimelech, you have to restore Sarah to Abraham or you're going to die.

Abraham has to pray for you or you're going to die. Two things have to take place. Abimelech has to give Sarah back and Abraham has to intercede on Abimelech's part or Abimelech will die.

That's what God tells Abimelech. God doesn't say word one about this to Abraham. And yet part of this is something Abraham's going to have to do.

I saw an episode of a program that used to be on a long time ago where there's a character in this sitcom who is a mailman and he's not the brightest guy in the world and he fancies himself to be a comic and he gets a chance to go be a stand-up comic. You know, these clubs that let amateur night let someone come up. But he fails miserably

because his whole stock of humor is to stand up and point out situations and say, what's up with that? And he'll say, you know, here's something that happens.

What's up with that? And I feel like asking that question here. You look at the fact that God appears to Abimelech, that God tells Abimelech that Abraham, the man who has just committed this great failure, is going to have to intercede for him or he's going to die. What's up with that? Well, we're going to pause and take our break.

And when we come back, we'll see if we can solve this puzzle.