



When I was a kid, my brother and I loved to watch All-Star Wrestling. One of the great things about this kind of wrestling was the cast of characters. There were guys like Haystack Calhoun, Bearcat Wright, Pepper Gomez, The Sheik and The Spoiler. The world of All-Star wrestling was a black and white world. There were good guys and bad guys and no in-between. The battles that took place on the mat, in a mixture of ritual and hype, were really the epic battles between good and evil that have been played on history's landscape for ages.

There was always a kind of pattern for how these battles played out. The good guy, say Pepper Gomez, would be wrestling a bad guy like The Sheik (you never put two good guys in the ring together). The match would begin and inevitably the bad guy would be destroying the good guy. Finally, the good guy would be lying flat on his back and the referee was about to slap the mat for the third time to end the fight. It was a horrible, awful moment. How could Pepper Gomez possibly lose to The Sheik? But, lo and behold, like a man raised from the dead, Pepper would bounce up and proceed to make mince meat out of The Sheik for the rest of the match. When it was all over, my brother and I could go to bed and rest in the assurance that our hero was victorious and all was right in the world.

The setting for the drama is a period of great tribulation

Revelation 11 portrays a similar drama between good and evil. It's a drama with a hero; it's a drama with a villain; and it's a drama with a great reversal. The setting for the drama takes place in the interlude between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets. The sounding of the first six trumpets brought unparalleled devastation to the earth. These describe a time of great tribulation when God will unleash his judgment on a fallen and rebellious world. But before the sounding of the seventh trumpet there is a pause or an interlude, just like we saw between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals. These interludes serve an important purpose in the narrative of Revelation. While all hell is breaking loose on earth, they pull back the curtain and allow us to see God is still on his throne and he'll protect and ultimately vindicate his people.

In the first part of the interlude John was given a book and told to eat it. It was sweet like honey in his mouth but bitter when he digested it. Now in 11:1-2 he's given a measuring rod like a staff and told to get up and measure the temple, its altar, and

those who worship in it. But he's not to measure the outer court, better known as the court of the Gentiles, because for 42 months the nations of the earth will be allowed to trample on it. Now John is having a vision. This is not a literal rebuilt temple, but the temple is symbolic of the people of God, the church. One of the New Testament's common metaphors for the church is the temple of God. The act of measuring the temple and its worshippers is an act symbolizing God's care and preservation of his people. Remember in the interlude back in chapter 7 how the 144,000 were sealed and this seal was for protection? Measuring is like sealing. What's measured at God's command is under his direct care and control. This care and protection isn't a guarantee against physical danger or even martyrdom, but it assures us of participation in God's ultimate victory and entrance into heaven.

But why does God tell John **not** to measure the outer court? That's an indication that God's people will have to suffer for a period of time. The inner temple probably refers to God's people from the perspective of heaven; the outer court sees them from the perspective of earth. As a heavenly entity the church is protected; as an earthly entity it's not. But God is still in charge; he's the unseen hand behind that phrase, "*it has been given to the nations.*" And all of this will only last for 42 months. In the next three chapters John will talk about 3-1/2 years, 42 months, and 1260 days, all referring to the same period of time. In the Old Testament Daniel was told the time of the end would be marked by a period identified as "*a time, times and half a time*" (Dan 12:7). This is that period. John tells us that during this time God's people will suffer. We can understand perhaps why the little book John had to eat was bittersweet; sweet because it spoke of the ultimate victory of God and his people; bitter because it will also involve a time of suffering.

But let's go back to our drama. The drama begins in v.3 by telling us of two heroes who rise up during this dark period of time. They're introduced in verses 3–6.

The drama begins by telling us about two heroes

"And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for twelve hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. And if anyone wants to harm them, fire flows out of their mouth and devours their enemies; so if anyone wants to harm

them, he must be killed in this way. These have the power to shut up the sky, so that rain will not 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 plague, as often as they desire."

Our two heroes are called "witnesses" because they're called to prophesy during these 42 months or 1260 days. God probably selected two of them because the Bible requires the testimony of two people to verify a fact. We also know that Jesus sent his disciples out two by two. They're clothed in sackcloth because the message they'll preach has an aspect of mourning and doom. These aren't feel-good preachers; these guys aren't out to get a laugh; they're not entertaining people; their message is serious. The time is short. You need to repent. If you want to be saved, you need to run to Jesus.

Notice they're likened to two olive trees and two lampstands. The Old Testament prophet Zechariah also spoke about olive trees and lampstands in the same breath (Zech 4:1-7). The olive trees indicate a plentiful supply of oil for the lampstands. In the Bible oil is always symbolic of the Holy Spirit. These two witnesses will be dependent on the Spirit and filled with his power. As lampstands they will shine like lights in the darkness of that day.

Actually their ministry will look a lot like two other well known witnesses: Moses and Elijah. All the things Moses and Elijah did, they'll do. Elijah's enemies were consumed by fire at the word of the prophet; he also shut up the sky so it didn't rain. Moses turned the waters into blood and struck the earth with all kinds of different plagues. This is power! These two witnesses will be men empowered by the Spirit.

No matter how bad things get, God seems to always have a witness or two. That's how he works. He calls men and women to stand against the tide and bear faithful witness to the truth. Jesus said to his disciples and to us, "**You shall be my witnesses**" (Acts 1:8). Many of us watched a good example of that on Thursday night when Colt McCoy, the star QB for the Texas Longhorns was interviewed after his team lost the national championship game. Colt was injured on the fifth play of the game and unable to play after that. He was crushed. As the interviewer held the microphone to his mouth he fought back tears. When he finally got some words out he said something like this: "I don't question why this happened. I know God is in charge. I trust him. I'm standing on the rock." It was a great word of witness, especially because it came not from a guy who just won but lost! There is power in that. God can use that brief word of witness to change someone's life.

That's what God will do through the ministry of these two faithful witnesses. But not everyone will listen. In the next few verses we're introduced to our villain.

The drama continues by telling of an evil villain

"When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war with them, and overcome them and kill them. And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which mystically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. Those from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations will look at their dead bodies for three and a half days, and will not permit their dead bodies to be laid in a tomb. And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth" (verses 7-10).

The villain in this drama is simply called "*the beast*." This is our first look at a figure who will be prominent in the rest of the book. He most likely represents an evil figure who will rise up in those dark days of the end, called Antichrist. His demonic origin and character is seen by the fact that he comes up out of the abyss; that's the home of Satan and his forces. Three key verbs describe the beast's assault on the witnesses: he makes war, he conquers, and he kills. The witnesses are overcome by his overwhelming power. But though the residents of the abyss look fearsome, we know that even they are ultimately under the rule of God. They can do nothing outside of God's permission.

The two witnesses are shamed by not being buried. This was one of the deepest insults of that culture. Their dead bodies lie in the open for all to see and gloat over. This is like the bodies of American soldiers being hung on a bridge in Baghdad. The city where this abuse occurs is identified in four different ways. It's the "*great city*," which elsewhere in Revelation refers to Babylon. Babylon is a metaphor for the home of those living their lives apart from God. The city is also Sodom and Egypt. Sodom is a symbol of utter depravity. Egypt is the empire which held God's people captive. Finally, the city is the place where their Lord was crucified—Jerusalem. It's as if Jerusalem was indistinguishable from Sodom, Egypt and Babylon. It may be the great city, but it's no longer the holy city. The fact that "*men from every people, tribe, language and tongue*" view them and "*those who dwell on the earth*" rejoice and exchange gifts over their death, shows us how corrupt that city had become. I suppose they party because their consciences are no longer tormented by the warnings of judgment and call to repentance.

Now our heroes aren't just down for the count, they're lifeless. They're finished. There are times in life where it seems that all that's good and right is finished and done for. The good guys are finished and the bad guys gloat and rejoice. It appears evil has finally won and good is destroyed.

There are times in each of our lives where we feel this. A good friend of mine is a college football coach. He's also a believer

committed to making a difference for Christ. He waited 25 years to get his first head coaching job. It was a dream come true for him. He worked incredibly hard to make that team a success; often enduring 80-hour work weeks. He made it a priority to operate his program without compromising the rules, treating people right, and giving his players an opportunity to not just hear the gospel but see it lived out in a man who deeply cared for them. After five years it was clear he was making an impact. Many players coming from fatherless homes confessed he was the only father they ever knew. Many had trusted Christ. On the field, though they improved tremendously, they struggled to get to a bowl game. So after five years he was fired. That's the way it works in college football. But I know that was the hardest day of his life. It felt like such a defeat. What about all the work he'd poured into that program? What about those kids who depended on him? What about the need for there to be a witness in that dark place? Sometimes it just seems that the voice of God is silenced and evil wins.

In 1949 the Chinese church numbered about a half million people, largely as the result of the faithful witness of missionaries from the West. But following the Communist takeover in 1949 all the missionaries were forced to flee. It was a time of great discouragement and defeat. The missionaries feared for the survival of the Chinese church, all the more so as reports filtered out about the horrors of government persecution and killings and the Cultural Revolution. By 1958 the government had closed all visible churches. Mao's wife told foreign visitors, "Christianity in China has been confined to the history section of the museum. It is dead and buried." In the 1970s a visiting Christian delegation reported, "There is not a single Christian left in China."

What do you do when it seems like all the heroes are gone and all that's good is dead and buried? Maybe a better question is, what does God do?

The drama concludes with a great reversal

"But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God came into them, and they stood on their feet; and great fear fell upon those who were watching them. And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, 'Come up here.' Then they went up into heaven in the cloud, and their enemies watched them. And in that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. The second woe is past; behold, the third woe is coming quickly" (verses 11–14).

Now **here** is a great reversal! Just when we thought our heroes were down for the count, lying dead in the street, enemies gloating over them, God steps in. Ray Stedman used to say that resurrection power works best in graveyards. It's true! God breaths life into these two witnesses and raises them up. Now

those who gloated over their dead bodies are terrified. They listen and watch as God calls the two up to heaven in a cloud. What would you do if you were them? I'd probably repent right then and there! But it took more than that to change them.

But then something else happened, something even more amazing. There was a great earthquake and one tenth of the city (7,000 people) died. That's bitter. But look what it says next: **"the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven."** That's sweet. Somehow God used all of this to bring some of these people to faith. And not just a few. The vast majority repented. Nine out of ten people gave glory to God. That's a revival! Remember at the end of the terrible judgments unleashed by the first six trumpets, the ones who survived still didn't repent. God isn't content for the nations to die in their rebellion. His desire is for a full heaven, not a full hell. The Bible says the Lord is a **"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness..."** (Ex 34:6). If people don't repent when God sends warnings of judgment, how will he bring them to repentance? He does so through the faithful witness of his people. When people see victory rising out of defeat, then they'll repent and give glory to God.

God wins no ultimate victories except out of the grave of apparent defeat

And that's the lesson of this drama. We, his witnesses, are involved in an epic battle between good and evil; between the beast and the lamb. In the end, the lamb will win and his faithful witnesses will win with him. But this story teaches us God wins no ultimate victories except out of the grave of apparent defeat. This is true of us because it was first true of Jesus. We follow in the footsteps of the Lamb. He was killed for his faithful witness, but God raised him from the dead and took him to heaven. We follow the Lamb wherever he goes—in life, in death, and in resurrection.

There are two heroes in this story. There are people who believe these are two actual men who will live and witness in the end times. That's possible, but I prefer to see them as a metaphor for the entire church. Their story is our story. We're called to faithful witness just as they were. And we may be called to die just like they did. But death is not the end. In the book of Revelation life on earth is **not** so infinitely precious that physical death is the ultimate tragedy.

The defeat we're talking about doesn't have to be physical death as it was with the two witnesses. It can be personal failure, sickness, circumstances that knock you to the floor. God uses all things as the raw material to teach us that resurrection power works best in graveyards. Peter had to learn this. When Jesus announced the night of his betrayal he was going to die, Peter said he would die with him. But that very night as Jesus appeared before the authorities, Peter denied him three times. He was

anything but a faithful witness. He wept bitter tears and went back to catching fish for a living. His witness was silenced by his own failure. But Jesus found him in his boat and called to him from the shore and Peter swam in and met Jesus on the beach. There, in the wake of his greatest failure, Jesus called Peter to shepherd and feed his sheep. Victory for Peter came out of the grave of apparent defeat.

We wonder why it works that way. We can learn why from Paul. Paul had something he called a “thorn in the flesh.” Whatever it was it weakened Paul. He saw it as a hindrance to his ministry; something that dragged him down and wore him out and made him less effective for Christ. He prayed and prayed and prayed for God to remove it and each time God said, “No.” Paul had a hard time understanding that until he heard the Lord say to him, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness”* (2 Cor. 12:9). God wins no ultimate victories except out of the grave of apparent defeat. Why? He wants us to know how desperately we need his resurrection power; our power isn’t enough; we need him.

Paul once said he wanted above all to know Christ, *“and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death”* (Phil 3:10). If we’re to be faithful witnesses, if we’re to experience his resurrection power, we have to learn to share in the fellowship of his sufferings; we have to be conformed to his death.

But sometimes, especially in today’s church culture, we see faithful witness more in terms of power and success than of weakness, defeat, and even death. But the early church grew not because it had any power, but because it bore faithful witness to

Jesus, even unto death. Too often we rely on our own power and might, upon programs and techniques, instead of the cross.

About 100 years after Revelation was written, Tertullian, a Christian lawyer from North Africa, wrote a defense of the faith addressed to the “Rulers of the Roman Empire.” He said of the Church, “We are but of yesterday, and we’ve filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum.... The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.” From that came the famous saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” In just 100 years and in the midst of violent persecution and no strength of its own the early Church grew to fill every corner of the Empire.

Conclusion

After the defeat of 1949, did the church die out in China? Quite the reverse. The church there now numbers 50 million. Now the Chinese church is sending out missionaries into Central Asia. The Chinese church was supposedly finished and had no strength of its own but it prevailed over the Cultural Revolution.

And my friend? Well, he got another job, and he feels more excited about having the same impact there than he did at the last place.

What about you? You want to be a faithful witness. But there are times in life where you’re down for the count. But God isn’t finished. With God there is always hope. Will you be willing to embrace weakness, defeat and even failure, knowing that God wins no ultimate victories except out of the grave of apparent defeat?