

Fire-Breathing Witnesses

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Well, it's generally known amongst correctional services that punishment by itself doesn't reform criminals.

In fact, the South African National Institute of Crime Prevention estimate that about 87%, up to 87% of convicted criminals who go through the prison system end up re-offending after release and ending up back in the system.

It's a sad statistic, but it's true. Punishment by itself doesn't seem to reform. But the same is true of humanity's relationship with God.

And we saw that, didn't we, last week in Revelation 9. We've been looking through Revelation, which gives us these behind-the-scenes pictures of what's going on in our world.

And it's explained to us so far that the reason the world is in the state it is in is because it is under judgment. And we saw that depicted through, you remember, the horsemen, the four horsemen, and the trumpets.

[1 : 04] And this is judgment that is given by God to warn humanity of what it's leading up to. When we face our God in the final judgment, and He brings His perfect justice and fearful justice to the sin of the earth.

And that's where all these judgments are leading up to, and they're warnings to repent. COVID, it could be seen in that way. That it's, you know, God allows these things to remind us of our mortality, to remind us of the fact that we're only here for a breath, and then we're thrust into eternity way before we can prepare for it.

And so that's why God allows these things to happen. But what we've seen and what we see around us is that humanity still stubbornly refuses to change and to take those judgments seriously. I don't think church attendance has risen because of COVID. If anything, it's dropped. Because humanity, the Bible tells us, refuses to turn from living the way we want to live and not God's way and worshipping everything that is not God and valuing everything that we shouldn't be valuing. In fact, we see this. Look in your Bibles at the end of chapter 9, or we saw last week. That's how it ends up. After these series of judgments, and we've gone through the seals, we've gone through the trumpets, and what's the result?

[2 : 38] Look at the end of chapter 9. The rest of the people who were not killed by these plagues did not repent of the works of their hands to stop worshipping demons and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood which cannot see, hear, or walk.

And they did not repent of their murders, their sorceries, and their sexual immorality or their thefts. God's judgment comes to the earth, and it's business as usual for humanity.

Nothing changes. And that's the dilemma that we find ourselves here in the book of Revelation so far in the story. The dilemma is that God is sending these warning judgments to earth, and yet there's no response.

How will God achieve His purposes to save and to bring His kingdom if His warnings are falling on deaf ears? That's the problem we face now in Revelation.

And the solution to that problem is in today's passage. Chapters 10 and 11. Between the 6th and the 7th trumpet, there's this pause, just like there was a pause between the 6th and the 7th seal, you'll remember.

[3 : 45] And in this pause, which is chapter 10 and 11, we learn about what the solution is to this problem of God's warnings falling on deaf ears.

How is He going to rouse the world to hear Him and to repent? Well, that's what we're going to discover this morning with His help. And it begins with an angel, at the beginning of verse 10, coming to John and bringing a scroll to him, telling him to eat the scroll, to really ingest and to

internalize what the scroll says.

Now, a scroll, you should know by now, represents the will of God, God's plans, the revelation of God's plans. We had the scroll at the beginning in chapter 5, but nobody was able or worthy to open it except the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Because of what He did, He is able to now fulfill and bring about God's plans. And now we have a scroll that is given to John, which he's told to take on board. He's been revealed God's plans for how to solve this problem of judgment not causing people to repent.

And He is to take this on. And this eating of the scroll, it's a weird image, but we also see it in prophets of the Old Testament. When they're told to eat the scroll figuratively, it's to take on board and be commissioned to take and reveal God's plans to other human beings.

[5 : 05] It's a great privilege and responsibility they have when they are told to eat the scroll. And so that's what John's told now. He's got to pass on to you and me through what he writes down, God's plans for this world to solve this problem.

Now, he does that, but the plans that he then outlines are given to us in a series of bizarre visions. And if we're going to understand God's plans, we're going to understand how people can come to repent and God bring about His kingdom, then we need to work through and understand these weird visions.

And so look from chapter 11 from verse 1 right to verse 13. There's just vision after vision after vision, and they're really bizarre at first reading.

So he's told to measure this temple, and then as he's measuring the temple, it gets trampled by the nations. They come and trample the outer courts of the temple. And then two witnesses arise to prophesy for 1,260 days, and they're called olive trees and lampstands.

And then there's fire pouring from their mouths to consume their enemies. And then they shut the sky and turn waters to blood. And then a beast comes up from a pit to kill them. And then their bodies lay in the public square and are stared at for three and a half days while people have a big party.

[6 : 28] Then they come back to life and go to heaven, and there's an earthquake. Okay, that's God's plan. Now, it doesn't sound like something from the Bible.

It sounds like an Avengers movie, really. All these crazy things that are happening. And as people throughout the years have read this prophecy and these weird symbols, there have been countless interpretations, many fanciful interpretations of what this means.

Some people think this is talking about two actual individuals in the future who will preach near the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the temple that's been trampled by the nations.

And there have been kind of imaginative ideas of what these two people would do. Here's a picture, actually I found on the internet, of two witnesses taking out this Islamic terrorist about to gun them down with flames from their mouth.

In the next picture you see, he doesn't end up too well. Okay, so that's how some people interpret this prophecy. But by now, we should know that's not how we should interpret Revelation, right?

[7 : 39] It's not talking about literal things that are going to happen that we've got to predict from these weird visions. There's a reason it's given symbolically, and they are symbols. They all symbolize realities, but they are not themselves the literal realities.

And so when we read a passage like this, we've got to be asking, what do these pictures actually symbolize? Now again, we can make up weird and fanciful interpretations for what they symbolize, but hopefully you know by now, after a few weeks of studying Revelation, how we decode these symbols.

How do we do it? Anyone? You go to the Old Testament. Thank you. Okay. The Old Testament is our decoder. For Revelation. You know, I don't know if you remember back in the day when you had Mnet decoders.

Put up your hand if you ever had an Mnet decoder. Anyone? Yeah, there was a few. All the millennials are going, what are you talking about? Okay, so a decoder was, Mnet was a paid, it was South Africa's first paid subscription TV, and you would have to buy a decoder, and then pay, I think it was 29 rand a month.

And then the decoder would take the garbled signals. If you try to tune into Mnet, not in open time, without a decoder, it would just be garbled signals. The decoder would make sense of the garbled signals, and then you could see what's going on, and you could watch carte blanche, or whatever you wanted to watch.

[9 : 08] The Old Testament is our decoder for revelation. It's the way we take all these garbled signals, these weird visions that we just can't make sense of, we put them through the decoder, we find these symbols in the Old Testament, we see what they were saying in their context, and it starts to make sense of it.

That's what we're going to do in a few minutes. We're going to go through that exercise and see if it works. But before that, I just want to address why. Why does John write in this way?

Why does he write with all these Old Testament symbols, instead of just telling us what's going to happen? Wouldn't it be simpler? If he just told us, this is what's going to happen, and he outlines it, instead of these weird Old Testament symbols.

But there's a reason he does it, and this is the reason. That as we look through the Old Testament, and we find these symbols, and see what they mean, we discover that John is describing, not one future event, but a repeated pattern of what happens to God's people, as they come up against an ungodly world.

That's why it has to be in symbols, because it's not one event. It's something that happens over and over again. It's not a prediction of a specific event, that's going to happen in the future, but it's patterns of things that have already happened, in the history of God's people, that recur in every generation, in some way or another, and that is why revelation is actually equally valid, in every generation.

[10 : 35] Revelation isn't only applicable, to the very last generation, or to the very first generation, in John's time of the church. Every generation since John wrote, revelation has been equally applicable to, because it's describing realities, that exist in every generation.

And that's why it has to be in symbolic language, and not in literal language. Because John couldn't have mapped out, every single possible occasion, you know, up until the 21st century, where these things happen.

So, he writes it in these Old Testament symbols, to give us a pattern, that we can then look around, read our newspapers, and read these things, in the framework that revelation gives us.

That's how it works. Okay, so let's try, put the decoder to the test, shall we? Let's try decode, these weird signs, that we read in Revelation 11, with the Old Testament.

I'm going to, I'm going to, this is going to be quite quick fire, I'm going to go, quite quickly through, these Old Testament references. So let's, let's go and see what we find.

[11 : 42] So the first one, measuring the temple, that John is told to do, in verse 1, that comes from Zechariah 1 to 2, and Ezekiel 40, where there's two occasions, of measuring the temple, and it was both in the context, of the people of God in exile, and the measuring of the temple, symbolized who, finding out who the true people of God were, even while they were in exile.

The, the invisible true people of God, while they were away from, from home. Okay, then the trampling by the nations, of the outer courts of the temple, that comes from Daniel, and he talks about the Syrian invasion, that's going to come, and talks about it as the Gentiles, the nations, trampling the temple of Jerusalem.

Jesus, incidentally, also talks about, the invasion of the Romans, that's going to happen, in his disciples' lifetime, in the same terms. So, broadly actually, it's talking about, whenever God's people are attacked, or opposed, by world powers, in particular times, in history.

And then, we've got the, two witnesses, who are described as, olive trees and lampstands. Now, we already should know, lampstands represent, churches. We've seen that in Revelation already, but, this actually comes from, Zechariah 4, where, it's describing, God's people, returning from exile, back to Jerusalem, bringing the, the light, of the lampstands, back into the temple, back into the city of Jerusalem.

Then we've got the numbers, 1,260 days. That, also, comes from, Daniel, chapter 7 and 12, where he talks about it, in fact, it was in our reading, he talks about it as a, a time, time, and half a time.

[13 : 20] Time, times, and half a time. Which is, three and a half years. But he talks about it in that way, because it's not a literal, three and a half years. It's a period of time, with three and a half, which is half of seven, and a significant number of itself, which is, 1,260 days.

But basically, in Daniel, it talks about the, the, the time, the period of, the set period of time, that God's people go through tribulation, when they're being attacked.

And the 42 months, is also how it's described here. So, you'll see John says, it's 1,260 days, and it's 42 months. And 42, is a number that, connects to the wilderness wanderings, of Israel.

There were 42 encampments, that are listed, in the Old Testament. And so, 42 was the number, that associated, with the time of Israel, in the wilderness, between their redemption, and their salvation, from Egypt, and their arrival, in the promised land.

That time, is represented by 42. And the, 1,260 represents, a time of tribulation. So you see how, we slowly, if you do this work, now you could do this, with a good cross reference Bible, and, a few hours.

[14:31] You could do exactly this. You could go and find, all of these references, and read them in their context. But if you do the work, slowly these signs, you put them together, start to make sense. But before we finish, let's go through the rest of them.

So, the fun one, fire pouring, from the mouths, of the witnesses, to consume their enemies. What is that talking about? Is it talking about, two people in Jerusalem, that have superpowers, that are able to, take out Islamic terrorists?

No. That comes from, Jeremiah 5.14. Which, his message, that God gives Jeremiah the prophet, is described as, fire coming from his mouth, because it is judgment, to those who ignore it.

That's what it means, in the Old Testament. Basically, it's to say that, if you hear this message, and you ignore it, or you oppose it, you ignore it to your peril. You ignore it to your destruction.

Okay, so the message, that comes out of their mouth, is powerful, and it brings judgment, on those who ignore it. That's what it means. Then, what about shutting the sky, and turning waters, into blood?

[15:33] Okay, now, you might be getting sleepy now. So, let me turn it over to you. This is one for you to decode. Let's see if you've been following so far. Where do we find that, in the Old Testament? Turning waters into blood.

The Exodus, thank you. Moses, right? One of the plagues. Moses put his staff in the water, turned to blood, as a sign of judgment, to Pharaoh. And the shutting the skies?

Elijah, thank you, Lorraine. And that's in 1 Kings 11. And so, these are talking about the two prophets, who powerfully, with powerful signs, called people to repent, especially in times of darkness, in Israel's history, and in times of intense pagan idolatry, that was surrounding them.

So, it's talking about the prophets, that prophesied in a time, when the people of Israel, were living in the midst, of this intense paganism. Okay? Then, you've got the beast, that arises from the pit, to kill them.

That comes from Daniel 7, and the beast, always refers to an earthly kingdom, that opposes God's people. So, particular earthly kingdoms, in history arise, and they have, particular policies, and laws, against the preaching of the gospel, and against God's people.

[16:48] And, whenever that happens, they're described in the Bible, as beasts. Then, you've got this party, that goes on for three and a half days, when they're, when they're dead, and these people exchanging gifts, Christian killing gifts.

And that, also comes from Daniel 7, where God's people, for a time, are handed over to, the powers that oppose them, and those powers celebrate, their downfall. But then, they come back to life, verse 11, which is, language taken, from Ezekiel chapter 37.

Remember, the valley of dry bones, and, how, God, restores his people, after exile, and after their defeat, and he rises them up again, specifically, with the promise of resurrection.

And then, in verse 12, these two witnesses, go to heaven, and that refers to, what happened to Elijah, when God approved of his ministry, and vindicated him. And then, it ends off with an earthquake, and that's from Ezekiel 38, which talks about, and not just Ezekiel 38, there's earthquakes, throughout the Old Testament, and that, they always symbolize God's, judgment in bringing, major disorder, and upheaval, in certain times in history, to particular nations, or cities.

Okay, so now, now we've taken this, and we've done the hard work, of filtering, these weird symbols, through the decoder, of the Old Testament, and it comes out, on the other end, and it starts to make sense.

[18:11] What does it all mean? How do we now, bring all of these ideas, from the Old Testament, these patterns, together, and sum it up? Well, let's work it out. So, it's talking about, a time of conflict, between, between God's people, and the world.

Generally, that time of conflict, is, the whole time, between, the, between redemption, and the promise, which is symbolized, by that 42, and Israel's, wilderness wanderings.

But, between the time, that they're saved, and that they arrive home. For us, for Christians, that's between the first, and the second coming, of Jesus Christ. And during that time, there will be, times of tribulation, where God's people, are opposed.

That's the, 1260 days. And during this time, where God's people, are opposed, where the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of the world, are overlapping.

God's people, will be increasingly, closed in, by the world. The temple, trampling, will happen, throughout history. That God's people, will be opposed. And even within, the courts, of the church, even within the precincts, of the church, there will be, imposters, and there will be people, who oppose it, and there will be scandals.

[19 : 25] But, what we also, discover, in the measuring, of the temple, is that the true people, of God, will be preserved, and they will be witnesses. Like the prophets, of the Old Testament, who brought God's word, to people, who didn't want to hear it.

And, their words, will have power. And, they will be dangerous, to ignore. But, people won't want, to hear them. And, ungodly societies, will rise up, the beasts.

And, they will want, to shut, God's people down, and they will seem, to win for a time. But, God will vindicate, his people, and raise them, from the dead.

And, most importantly, for our purposes, this morning, the testimony, of God's people, is what will bring about, true repentance, in the nations.

Look, at the end, of, this vision, and compare it, to the end of chapter 9. So, look at this, look in your Bibles, chapter 9, verse 21, and they did not repent, of their murders, their sorceries, their sexual immorality, and their theft.

[20 : 34] So, God's judgment comes, no effect. Okay, but then you've got, the witnesses coming. God's people, even in, this, difficult time, and they declare, God's truth, and what happens?

At the end, then God's judgment, comes again, but look at the difference. Verse, chapter 11, verse 13, right at the end, the survivors, were terrified, and what did they do?

They gave glory, to the God of heaven. See the difference? See the, the different effect, of God's judgment, at the end of, chapter 9, and here in chapter 11.

What's, what makes the difference? What makes the difference, is, God's people, standing up, and witnessing, in, the midst of, tribulation, and trouble.

Now, that's the picture. See, we've put it through, the Old Testament, Dakota, it starts to make sense, doesn't it? And it starts to actually, make a lot of sense, of what's going on, in our world, doesn't it? So, how does this, how does this help, make sense of our world?

[21 : 41] Well, it explains why, the church today, seems more and more, ineffective. And it does, doesn't it? In our culture, the way our culture is going, the way the world is going, the church seems to be, more and more on the fringe, and less and less effective, less and less, in the center of society, like it was, back in the day, and more and more, shut down.

People, less and less tolerant, of what the church is saying. Secular society, opposing it, and the church does face, more opposition, where people even celebrate, winning over it, don't they?

I mean, think of, I mean, that's happening in, in our culture, but in, in subtle ways, but think of how, how people celebrate, when a, a traditional, Christian law, about for example, marriage and sexuality, is overturned.

People, dance in the streets, and wave flags, when that happens. But it'll get worse. This is what this prophecy, is telling us. That, we should expect it, it's explained, and it's going to get worse.

Look at verse 10 again. Those who live on the earth, will gloat over them, and celebrate, and send gifts to one another, because these two prophets, had tormented those, who lived on the earth.

[22 : 56] See, the more intolerant, the world will get of the gospel, the more they will be tormented, when they hear it, the more they will, want to shut it down, because it's convicting them, because it's telling them, of their God.

God, it's telling them, of his judgment, and they don't want to hear that. They will be tormented, by hearing that truth, and they will celebrate, when it's shut down. It will happen, more and more, and the church, will seem to be losing, more and more.

But what this, passage, this vision is here, to tell us, is that it's not losing, and it's not ineffective. On the contrary, the true people of God, will keep declaring, the truth, of God's word, and the truth, of Jesus Christ, despite opposition, and when they do, that is what will have, real power.

And it does. We see it. We see the power, of God's word declared. We see the lives, that are transformed, when people come, face to face, with the truth, and it sinks in. And how much change, comes to people, and to families, and even to societies, when God's true word, declared by his church, gets in. And the funny thing is, we see it, even more powerfully, where the beast, is most at work, in today's world, which is, countries like North Korea, and Iran. [24 : 17] That's where the beast, is really, having a field day, in keeping Christians, shut down. But you know what? That's also where the church, is growing most powerfully. Where the word, has most powerful effect.

And that's exactly, what Revelation said, would happen. What we're seeing in the news, what we're seeing, in the world around us, exactly, what Revelation says. Now, because of that opposition, because that's going to happen, and because we've, most of us have lived, most of our lives, in a time where, where Christianity, is generally accepted.

But because it's going to be, less and less tolerated, and the pattern, will keep on repeating itself, we will be tempted, to keep quiet. We'll think, well just, you know, towing the line, being politically correct, not talking too much, about Jesus, and God's, declarations, and judgments, of this world, which people don't like to hear.

That's going to keep us safe. You know, we can, we can, you know, talk, we can talk to people, when they want to hear us, but let's not rock the boat. That's the attitude, often that Christians will have.

We'll be tempted, to shut up. And that's why we need this vision, in Revelation, to remind us, to remind us, that it's our testimony, especially in the face of tribulation, and resistance, which is the power.

[25 : 35] That is the very thing, that God will use, to bring repentance, that judgments alone, could never do. Your testimony, your standing, for Jesus Christ, and declaring, your faith in Him, when people don't want to hear it, is actually, what will have, the most power.

That's what this prophecy, is telling us. Okay, so how do we then, if that's what this is saying, how do we live in light, of those facts? Well, I want to, I want to take us, to two, New Testament passages, that will help us, before we finish, this morning.

First is Romans 12. So you can turn there. Romans 12, from verse 19. Friends, do not avenge yourselves.

Instead, leave room for God's wrath, because it is written, vengeance belongs to me, I will repay, says the Lord. But, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink, for in doing so, you will heap fiery coals, on his head.

Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil, with good. Okay, this is very important. When, if revelation is right, when the forces of evil, and the beasts, and the opposers, of the gospel, are going to be more, and more, intense, in their opposition of it.

[26 : 57] What must we do? We must not be conquered, by evil, first of all, and we must conquer it, with good. In other words, don't retaliate, with their weapons, to try to win over them. Because we are not, meant to win, in that way.

In fact, we should confuse them. When they think, we are anti-love, like the world thinks, Christians are today, we should show them, what real love looks like, by loving those, who hate us.

And by turning, the other cheek. Like Jesus said. That's how to confuse, our enemies. And that's also, the part of the testimony, that has the power, to cause them to repent.

And it's then, you know, it's then, when we are able to do that. When we are able, to not retaliate, and fight fire with fire. But to, to confuse, our enemies, with the power, of the love of God, through us, even when, they hate us.

That's when our message, will have the power, to convict. That's what this is saying, here in Romans. Let's turn to another one, 1 Peter 4. And this is the last one, I want to take you to, this morning.

[28 : 02] But I think, it's really going to help us, take this prophecy, that we've learned, from Revelation, which is talking about, the church of God, under opposition, in this age. And help us to know, how we're meant to respond to that.

How we're meant to live in that, as Christians. Instead of, hiding away, what must we do? 1 Peter 4, from verse 12. Dear friends, don't be surprised, when the fiery ordeal, comes among you, to test you, as if something unusual, were happening to you.

Instead, rejoice, as you share, in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may also, rejoice with great joy, when his glory is revealed. If you are ridiculed, for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit, of glory, and of God, rests on you.

Let none of you, suffer as a murderer, a thief, or an evildoer, or a meddler, but, if someone suffers, as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God, in having that name.

Okay? When you face resistance, as a Christian, you should glorify God, because you know, what it means? It means, that you are part, of the true temple, that John was called, to measure.

[29 : 20] The real people of God, who are actually, walking along, with Jesus Christ, sharing the road, that he walked, because he won, by losing. His message, got him killed, his enemies, gloated over him, while he was on the cross, they hurled insults at him, they walked past him, and they derided him, but his death, brought God's kingdom, because it brought, your and my salvation, and it, it laid the foundation, for his resurrection, three days later, which is the breaking in, of God's kingdom, to this world.

and so, when you, suffer for being a Christian, you are sharing, the experience of Christ, and you should glory at that, you should glory, that you are counted worthy, and so, to wrap up, ask yourself, ask yourself this question, is your Christianity, and the way, that you are a Christian, day to day, if you're a Christian, is it such, that it's going to cause, the beast to target you, or does the beast, not care about you, you're not a threat to him, you don't want to be there, if you're a Christian, you should live in such a way, that, that attracts the beast's attention, to target you, and to shut you up, or to put it another way, is the gospel, that you stand by, and live by, and share, a gospel, that would get you killed, because that bold, standing for Jesus, especially when it's unpopular, that's the fire, that will make a difference, that's where the power lies, and that's how God, will do his work, in bringing his kingdom, even when it looks like, we're losing the fight, so let's pray, and make sure, that that's true of us,

Lord, we thank you, for this revelation, of your plans, for this age, this overlap, of the kingdoms, that we're currently in, between redemption, and ultimate salvation, and we thank you, for explaining to us, with the patterns, that John has laid down, explaining to us, what's happening, in our world, and why, the Christian church, is opposed, and what our place, in it is, and we pray, that you would help us, to remember this prophecy, and help us to remember, that it's, it's standing, with Christ, especially through suffering, that is where the power lies, and that you are using, to cause, people to come, into the kingdom, help us to remember that, and help us to be bold, and help us, to live, and declare, a gospel, that we would, be willing to die for, in Jesus name, Amen.