

The Seventh Vial Chapter IX. The Two Witnesses



Continued from [Chapter VIII. The Measuring Of The Temple](#)

PLANTED by apostles, and watered by the labours of evangelists and pastors, Christianity grew and spread widely in the Gentile world. The legions from the banks of the Tiber gained victories less illustrious than the conquests achieved by the fishermen from the shores of Gennesareth, and the empire of Caesar was less extensive than the dominion of Christ. The nations inhabiting from India on the east, to Britain on the west, owned the truth, and submitted to the sway of the gospel. There were few places throughout this extensive tract where Christian congregations were not formed. The name of Jesus was known even on the frontier of China. Scattered throughout the continent of India, as well as in the islands of its Archipelago, were numerous companies of disciples.

The gospel had been planted, too, in those lands which were the birthplace of the human family; and it flourished upon the ruins of the Babylonian and Medo-Persian monarchies. The deserts of the sons of Ishmael, from the boundary of which the arms of Greece and Rome had recoiled, were subjugated by the cross. Amid the moldering (crumbling) temples of Egyptian mythology arose Christian sanctuaries. The gospel spread throughout Asia Minor, and the superstition and licentiousness of the region were restrained; it entered Greece, and its philosophy grew into disrepute; it was carried to Rome, and its idols were dethroned.

From Rome it spread northward, taming the fierceness and enlightening the darkness of barbarous nations; so goodly were the limits of the Church, so vast the territory she occupied. During these ages innumerable souls were converted, and passed to glory. The righteousness of Zion had gone forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles had seen her righteousness, and all kings her glory, and she was called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord had named.

But the faith which had been spread over so many lands, and received the homage of so numerous nations, was now to recede from its ancient limits, leaving the space it had filled covered once more with heathenism, under the name of Christianity. What a fearful fulfillment of the Apocalyptic prophecy given in the measuring of the temple, and the altar-worshippers, and the casting out of the outer court, that it might be trodden under foot of the Gentiles! The inquiry which must have immediately suggested itself to the mind of John, when the fate of the outer court was disclosed to him, could be

only this: Will the apostasy be universal? Shall none be spared to offer true worship and bear faithful witness for God in these evil times? Already John's anxiety on this point had been set at rest; for in virtue of the same commission by which he had cast out the outer court, he had included the temple, with the select company that ministered at the altar. This implied their preservation during the coming eventful epoch.

But the angel now proceeds to communicate fuller particulars. Under the history of the witnesses—for, while taken in connection with the temple they are priests, taken in connection with an apostate world they are witnesses—a succinct and clear account is given of the struggle which the followers of the Lamb should be called to maintain, during the forty-two months, with an ungodly and antichristian world; the persecutions that should befall them in the maintenance of their testimony; their almost total suppression, together with the truth to which they had testified; their sudden and miraculous revival at the very moment that their enemies were rejoicing on account of their death, and their public assumption to a state of dignity and power.

Thus we have the leading events of the twelve hundred and sixty days epitomized in the history of the witnesses, and presented in figures comparatively plain, that the more highly-wrought symbolical prefigurations that were to come after might be the more easy of interpretation.

“And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and threescore days, clothed in sackcloth.” – Revelation 11:3

God left not the old pagan apostasy without a witness, neither would he leave the antichristian apostasy without a witness. “I will give unto my two witnesses,” for so runs the original. The question is, what shall be given? The implied answer of our translation is, we think, the right one—“Power.” The power is spiritual; power to perceive the truth, and reject the errors by which so many would be misled; power to cleave to the truth, and resist the temptations before which the majority would fall; power to proclaim the truth, and, by doing so, to convert others who might stand in their room and maintain their testimony when they were called away, so that the line of witnesses should not be cut off, but might run continuously on till better times should come. Individually they would be removed by death or persecution, but, as a body, the witnesses would be inviolable.

Their work is next defined—“They shall prophesy.” Prophesying means here, as in many other passages of the New Testament, every kind of preaching by Divine aid. The prophesying of the witnesses was to consist, not in the revelation of new truths, but in the exposition of old ones. They were to receive and profess the whole body of doctrine revealed by Christ and His apostles; and, in doing so, they would testify against and condemn the Romish apostasy. Hence the name given to them—“Witnesses.” The name is borrowed from the Old Testament—“Ye are my witnesses,” said God to the ancient Israel. The honorable office of Israel—as a nation to whom had been committed the sacred oracles—was to stand before the other nations of the earth, and testify to the fact that Jehovah was the one true God, and that they were no gods that were made by men's hands. The same honorable office was to be assigned to the

little company before us. They were to stand before the antichristian nations, and testify to the fact that Christ was the one only Intercessor. As God termed the ancient Israelites "my witnesses," because they witnessed for the supremacy of God the Father, in opposition to the heathen deities, so here the angel, that is, Christ, calls these men "my witnesses," because they were to witness in behalf of the supremacy of God the Son, in opposition to the antichristian deities; and especially were they to witness for Him as the one Intercessor, in opposition to the numerous intercessors of the Romish Church.

The guise in which they were to discharge their office is specially marked. "They shall prophesy clothed in sackcloth." This is no mere stroke of coloring, introduced for the purpose of deepening the dark picture. It is a most significant symbol. It denotes the deep distress and mourning of the true Church during the whole of that period.

It was a thankless office which they were to discharge; and rough and cruel treatment was all the recompense that they would receive at the hands of man. The thought of the Church of God lying waste, and their brethren slain, would oppress their hearts with a continual sorrow. Denied all participation in honors and offices—deprived sometimes of their natural rights—hated of all men for His name's sake whose witnesses they were—and banished from society—they would exhibit the same picture of mourning as the ancient prophets, of whom it had been recorded, "They wandered about in sheep-skins and goat-skins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented (of whom the world was not worthy); they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." The attire of the witnesses presents a striking contrast to that of the harlot. During the period in question she was arrayed in scarlet and fine linen—they in sackcloth.

They were to prophesy clothed in sackcloth, many days. The exact number is determined—twelve hundred and sixty. These are not literal, but symbolical days, and denote years. The question touching the commencement of these days, which determines, of course, their expiration, is one of the most famous in the whole field of Apocalyptic inquiry. Of that we shall speak afterwards. At present we shall merely indicate the principle on which our interpretation of prophetic time proceeds. Scarce any principle is more clearly taught in the Word of God.

A day for a year is a mode of symbolic speech which appears to have been in use in very early times. The institution of the Sabbatical year was given in these terms. In Leviticus xxv., that year is spoken of as if it were one day, and termed the Sabbath of the land. When a mystic character was given to the prophet Ezekiel, and he was called, as the substitute of the house of Israel, to bear their iniquity, the length of the infliction was determined on this principle—a day for a year.

Ezekiel 4:5.6 For I have laid upon thee the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days: so shalt thou bear the iniquity of the house of Israel. And when thou hast accomplished them, lie again on thy right side, and thou shalt bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days: I have appointed thee each day for

a year.

God Himself announces the principle on which that arrangement proceeded. "I have appointed thee each day for a year." Like the prophet Ezekiel, these mystic witnesses were substituted for the Church, and called to prophesy, clothed in sackcloth, during as many days as she was afterwards to do years.

We have had experience, moreover, of the truth of this principle. Daniel's prophecy of seventy weeks completely establishes it. Between the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem, and the death of the Messiah, seventy weeks were to intervene. In seventy weeks there are four hundred and ninety days. And between the edict of Artaxerxes Longimanus and the death of Christ there were four hundred and ninety years (Editor: 490 – 3.5 years because Jesus was crucified in the midst of the 70th Week). In the prophecy before us, then, we are to substitute years for days. Our authority for doing so is clear.

During the long period of twelve hundred and sixty years was the Church to prophesy, that is, she was to testify against the apostasy of Rome doctrinally by professing the opposite truths, and practically by separating from her communion (fellowship); and she was to prophesy in sackcloth, that is, in the endurance of all the sacrifices and sufferings to which her faithfulness might expose her. Chased beyond the pale of civilized life, the confessors of the truth would pass their lives in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and reproach; and would often close them, as a testimony for the gospel, in prison or on the rack, at the burning stake, or amid the horrors of the scaffold.

The next question of importance is, Who are the witnesses? This part of the Apocalypse has been the subject of boundless conjecture. These interpretations, incongruous and irrelevant in many instances, we do not stay to enumerate; for it is unnecessary to state what it would be useless to refute. The character of the witnesses may be determined with certainty from the nature of their work. The matter of their witness-bearing was the TRUTH. The party for whom this testimony was borne was Christ—"my witnesses." The party against whom it was borne was Antichrist. Whom, in that case, can the witnesses be, but those, in whatever land, who, during the period of Antichrist, professed the truth of Jesus, and testified against the idolatries of Rome?

But why only two? "I will give power unto my two witnesses." We prefer the more common, because the more natural explanation. Two witnesses were enough in law to substantiate any fact. "At the mouth of two witnesses shall every word be established." But they were the smallest number that could do so. And, therefore, when we are told that TWO witnesses should prophesy, we are given to understand that such a number would be preserved from apostasy as should be competent to condemn the Romish idolators, and leave them without excuse. And when we are told that only two witnesses should prophesy, we are to infer that the number would not be greater than was absolutely requisite to give credibility to their testimony, and to take away all reasonable ground of excuse from the apostate nations. Few will maintain that individuals are intended: two literal men would have been far too few to bear testimony with effect against the apostasy of a world. Organized societies

must be meant. It is not persons, but Churches, that constitute the two witnesses. And if we look to the history of the period, we find a small but competent number, both in the East and in the West, who continued all along to testify against the prevailing corruptions.

We are disposed to concur in the opinion of Mr. Elliot, Mr. Faber, and others, that *the reference here is to the Eastern and Western Churches*. The former has, with great historical research, and with complete success, traced a succession of witnesses in both Churches, from the close of the sixth century till the Reformation. Speaking of the eastern Christians, and showing their claim to be regarded as one of the two Apocalyptic witnesses, Mr. Elliot ("*Horae Apocalypticae*," pp. 277–287) remarks—

"First, then, in regard both of ministers and congregations, the teachers and the taught, it is notorious that they bore a continuous and unvarying protest against those grosser superstitions of saint-mediatorship, image-worship, and other kinds of idolatry, through which the so-called Christians of the Roman world had degenerated into Gentiles of the outer court; and against which, consequently, witnesses answering to those of the Apocalypse must needs have testified."

"Second, though before the eyes of men the self-styled Catholics of the eastern and western Roman world seemed to constitute Christendom— though they filled, as it were, the whole *visible* temple—yet did these Paulikians" (the name given to the eastern Christians) "regard and speak of them throughout as those who belonged not to the Church of Christ, but, being apostates, belonged rather to the *Gentile* or *outer* court. Small as their numbers were, yet they called their assemblies the *Catholic Church*, and said, 'We are Christians, you are Romans.'"

"Thirdly, as the Apocalyptic witnesses are said to have observed the *commandments and Word of God*, so the adherence of the Paulikian dissentients to the gospel word, as the alone ground of their faith, subject of their preachings and teachings, and rule of life, is all along marked most strongly."

"Fourthly, it is obvious that the *privations and sufferings* entailed on them by their profession of faith were such as to make the mourning garb of sackcloth their fit clothing; as also that under them they exhibited a *self-denial, unwearied zeal, constancy, and fortitude*, through life, and unto death, just as if there was some superhuman power sustaining them; even a power such as St. John was told of in those words of the Apocalypse, 'I will give *power* to my two witnesses.'"

In these particulars we discern in this body of Christians the essential character of witnesses. They are divinely illumined. They see what has been hid from the wise and prudent of the world—the Truth to wit. They are divinely upheld: for they fulfill their testimony despite the numbers and power arrayed against them. And in the reproach, and buffetings, and death to which their testimony exposes them, we recognize what it had been foretold would be their distinguishing attire, their canonical vestments, if we may so speak—the robe of sackcloth.

Continued in [Chapter X. The Western Witnesses, or The Waldenses](#)

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