Group Discussion Questions for 5/8/13
Revelation 11

Read Revelation 11 without referring to notes or commentaries. Recall that we are between the 6th and the 7th trumpets; the 6th trumpet was blown in 9:13. Look back at the end of chapter 6 and chapter 7 to remind yourself of what happened between the 6th and 7th seals.

1. Think about the chapter as a whole. What images here must be symbolic? Which are possibly literal?

2. Consider verses 1 and 2. What is John told to measure? What is he told not to measure? In verse 2, what is the explanation given for his not measuring? What does this tell you about the concept behind the measurement? Ezekiel 40-48 records the measuring of a temple (I don't suggest you read all that!); see also 2 Corinthians 6:16 and Zechariah chapter 2 for measuring the temple. Daniel 9:25-27 and 12:7-12 mention similar periods of time to the 42 months referred to here.

3. List the characteristics of the witnesses, as described in verses 3-6. Are you reminded of any Old Testament characters? (No, I'm not going to give it away by listing verse references!) Why are they described as olive trees and lampstands? What useful substance do olive trees yield? Think about this, then look at Zechariah chapter 4.

4. How can you tell in verse 7 that God remains in control, even though His witnesses are killed? Look back to chapter 9 for the abyss.
5. What was characteristic of Sodom and Egypt? Why does God use these terms for (literal or figurative) Jerusalem? How would you describe the reaction of the residents of this city to the death of the witnesses? To their resurrection?

6. Look at the end of chapter 6 and the end of chapter 9; compare those sections to verse 13. When the people give "glory to the God of heaven," are they repenting and turning to God?


8. Think again about the 6th and 7th seals, and what happens between them. In what way are the 6th and 7th trumpets, and what happens between them, similar? In what way are they different?

9. Verse 1:3 tells us that the one who "heeds what is written" in this book will be blessed. What are we to heed from this chapter? What difference does this chapter make in the way we live our lives?

10. Think again about the literal and symbolic elements of this chapter. Can you come to a conclusion about this issue? Does your conclusion have an impact on your answer to question 9? You may want to look at Matt 24:11-14 and 27-31.
The Two Witnesses, 11:1-14

This second part of the interlude concentrates on the story of the two witnesses. Like Moses and Elijah, these witnesses perform striking miracles (vv. 5-6). Other Old Testament backgrounds are woven into the vision. The mention of two olive trees and lampstands (v. 4) likens the witnesses to the vision of Zechariah 4:1-14, in which the trees probably symbolize the ruling and priestly offices of Zerubbabel and Joshua. Thus the witnesses are prominent representatives of God. The witnesses’ stand against the Beast reminds us of the conflicts against bestial kingdoms in Daniel (vv. 7-10). Verse 8 reminds us of wicked, oppressive cities and powers: Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem that crucified Jesus. The resurrection in verses 11-12 reminds us of the resurrection of Christ, but also of the language of Ezekiel 37 and the rapture of Elijah.

Like John in 10:1-11, the two witnesses are models for all the saints to imitate. All of us are to be faithful to the testimony of Jesus, even in the face of violent persecution from the Beast. We must be willing to face martyrdom, and God guarantees our vindication (vv. 11-12).

Some aspects of this vision remain difficult and controversial. Some interpreters think that two literal individual human beings are in view: either two Christian prophets who were martyred shortly before the fall of Jerusalem, or two prophets who will appear shortly before the Second Coming. But in agreement with Revelation as a whole we find here a symbolic vision of Christian witness. The two witnesses are two lampstands (v. 4), indicating that they are symbolic figures standing for the witness of the lampstand-churches of 1:20. Thus they symbolize churches rather than specific human individuals. Two rather than seven lampstands are mentioned to imitate the pattern of Zechariah 4 and of Moses and Elijah (Matt. 17:3-4; cf. Deut. 17:6; Luke 10:1).

The trampling of the city for 42 months has sometimes been correlated with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. But a closer look shows that the events do not correspond in detail. Verse 1 indicates that the inner part, the temple and the altar, are preserved. And nothing that we know concerning the fall of Jerusalem corresponds exactly to the two witnesses. Instead, 11:1-14 gives a general visionary representation of the witness of the church and God’s preservation and vindication of the witness. The two witnesses are two lampstands (v. 4), that is, two churches (1:20).

The temple represents the presence of God on earth, especially through his people (see note on 4:1-5:14). Measurement signifies God’s knowledge and care (cf. Ezek. 40-41). The altar and those who worship there represent the true worshipers of God, who are sealed and protected (cf. 7:1-17). The destruction of the outer court represents the attack of outsiders on God’s people.

What about the 42 months? It is a limited time of distress and intense conflict between God’s people and their opponents (13:5). It is also described as 1260 days (11:3; 12:6) or a time, times, and half a time (three and a half years; 12:14). (In a symbolic context like this one, months are reckoned as consisting of 30 days each.) It is half of seven
years, which from a symbolic point of view suggests a complete period of suffering, cut short by half. The main background is found in Daniel 7:25, which in turn is related to other passages in Daniel (9:27; 12:7, 11-12). Some futurist interpreters look for a period of time of this length shortly before the Second Coming. But like other numbers in Revelation, this one is symbolic in character, and related to the three and a half days in 11:9, 11. It then designates a period of persecution of limited length.

The most significant clue comes from Daniel 9:27. In Daniel 9 God sets out a period of 70 weeks or 490 years or 10 jubilee cycles during which he will accomplish his purposes for worldwide redemption (Dan. 9:24). This period of 70 weeks builds on the earlier period of 70 years of exile prophesied by Jeremiah (Dan. 9:2; Jer. 25:12; 29:10). Each of Jeremiah’s 70 years is a sabbatical year in which the land rests (2 Chron. 36:21; Lev. 26:43; 25:1-7). Hence, symbolically speaking, it represents a total of 490 years. At the end of this period God favors Israel again and restores them to the land and to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4; 2 Chron. 36:22-23). But this restoration is only preliminary. The final restoration takes place at the conclusion of a second cycle of 490 years. And since the whole sabbath pattern symbolizes final rest, it is fitting that this second cycle consists of symbolical years, symbolizing the way to the consummation. The consummation occurs at the end of 490 symbolical years. The last week of years, 7 symbolical years, stands for the time of inaugurated eschatology, after the Messiah has come and accomplished redemption (Dan. 9:26a). In the middle of the last week the sanctuary is destroyed (Dan. 9:27), which took place in 70 A.D. The period from 70 A.D. to the Second Coming is the last half week of Daniel's prophecy, a period of trouble and persecution as in Daniel 7:25. The 1260 days is thus the entire interadvent period, viewed as a time of persecution and distress (cf. 2 Tim. 3:1-13; 2 Thess. 1:4-8).

Like other visions, this vision has multiple applications throughout the church age. For the seven churches in their first century context it indicates that persecution will come, but it will be limited in length and end in vindication (vv. 11-12). It likewise holds out the same promise for Christians throughout the ages. Just before the Second Coming we are to expect a violent crisis that will bring intense conflict and persecution (2 Thess. 2:1-12).

The witnesses work miraculous signs of judgment, in a manner reminiscent of Moses and Elijah, two great miracle-working prophets from the Old Testament (vv. 5-6). Like Moses and Elijah, the church bears prophetic witness. We call people to repentance and warn of coming judgment. Our total message includes not only good news concerning salvation in Christ, but also the revelation of God’s character, which implies that judgment against evil doers is inevitable. Our message is one of power—power to save, or power to punish as well (2 Cor. 2:15-17; Rom. 1:16). It is not an arbitrary power, to do with as we see fit, but a power that comes from God and that we exercise only as servants who ourselves proclaim a message that we cannot alter (Eph. 2:6; 2 Cor. 3:5-6; 6:6-7; 10:4-6).

The Beast in verse 7 represents demonized state power turned to persecute the church (see 13:1-10 and Introduction: Counterfeiting). Satan energizes false worship and stirs
up opposition to the true message, trying to snuff out Christians and their witness (12:13-13:10). Persecution and martyrdom throughout history are all of a piece, as verse 8 reminds us. Whether in Sodom (Gen. 19), in Egypt (Exod. 1-15), or in Jerusalem (Christ’s death), the enemies of God oppose God and his people. The witness of God’s people is odious to them, because they prefer the darkness (John 3:17-21). Instead of receiving the witness gratefully, they experience it as a torment (v. 10).

The picture given here is extreme, and for good reason. In most of life, when people inspect their conscious motives, they find confusing mixtures. The saints are followers of Christ, but their obedience is flawed and inconsistent. Non-Christians are in rebellion against God, but their rebellion is likewise inconsistent. They are not as bad as they could be, but are restrained in mysterious ways. They find themselves, albeit from wrong motives, admiring and imitating some of the good that they see around them. But this mixture of motives can easily obscure the seriousness of the most fundamental conflict in history, between God and his enemies. Revelation puts the spotlight on this fundamental conflict, and therefore depicts good and evil in black-and-white fashion. The two witnesses are supremely powerful witnesses. Conversely, their opponents are supremely hostile opponents. The dwellers on earth not only want to see the witnesses dead, but unashamedly rejoice and celebrate death, indicating the full hardness of their position (vv. 9-10). Such polarization of allegiance is the reality at a fundamental level. Revelation gives us a look behind the obscuring curtain of civilizing and moderating ploys that conceal our deepest allegiances.

The lesson is a most important one. In your own life, see the deadly conflict and persevere unflinchingly in witness and loyalty to Christ. In the lives of earthlings, see beneath the veneer of pleasantries the deadly opposition that only divine saving power can cure. Witness is a weighty factor in spiritual war. But it fails to convert unless God renews people’s hearts.

The scene is the great city, the worldly city, including not only Sodom and Egypt of old, not only Jerusalem, but Rome, each of the seven cities in Asia Minor, and our modern cities as well. It is the city bent on independence from God’s way, as was Babel of old (Gen. 11:1-9). The war between the two cities, the city of God (Heb. 12:22-29; 11:16) and the city of man, continues throughout history until Babel/Babylon is finally destroyed (Rev. 17-18) and the new Jerusalem comes to consummation (21:1-22:5).

The bodies of the witnesses lie unburied for three and a half days (vv. 9, 11). This three and a half days repeats on a smaller scale the period of three and a half years (12:14; see on 11:2) or 42 months in which the saints experience persecution. The three and a half years is a period of intense persecution. By analogy, the three and a half days are a period so intense that it looks as if the witness of the church is completely snuffed out. They are dead. Not only in the Roman Empire, but nowadays, and in the final crisis, it comes sometimes to a point when faithful witnesses seem to go down in defeat. The Christians are all in prison or dead, and apparently the idol state has triumphed. The antichrist tyrant is in control, whether Domitian or Diocletian or the
Spanish Inquisition or North Korean communism or Saudi Arabia’s Islamic state power. But note: **three and a half days** are seven days cut in half, signifying a domination that aspired to completeness (7), but is cut off half way (1/2 of 7). Moreover, three and a half clearly resonates with the three days of Christ’s resurrection (Matt. 12:40; Mark 8:31; etc.). Christ’s martyrdom and resurrection is the pattern, the firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:23, 49). We who belong to Christ cannot but share in his victory. So the martyr’s death is not defeat, but victory in union with Christ.