

Susanne Teske came to faith in Jesus in her 20's without the benefits of a Christian upbringing. Five years later she married Tilmann, a young pastor in their native Germany. She was 29. He was 31. Five years into their marriage, they landed on the mission field in Turkey – a Muslim dominated country yet it seemed to offer a semblance of freedom to do Christian work.

Though they didn't realize it, they were being watched by Turkish government intelligence. She writes "while it is legal to be a Christian missionary in Turkey, it is controversial, and the subject of overwhelming slander by authorities who paint Christians as immoral people seeking to ruin the nation and its culture."

Tilmann and Susanne had three children who grew up in Turkey. They felt safe and they had warm genuinely respectful relationships with their Turkish Muslim neighbors. These neighbors knew the Teske's went beyond the negative stereotypes spread by the Turkish media. Their children who had grown to 13, 11 and 8 had scores on Turkish friends who were playmates and buddies. Tilmann earned a living teaching German and English while also helping translate Bibles and Bible-related material for the Turkish people. He and Susanne also helped launch several small home churches.

But then came April 18, 2007, it started as any normal day. The kids were in school and Susanne went about her daily routine. Mid-morning she had tried to phone her husband. But his phone was turned off. She thought it odd but was not particularly concerned. A bookkeeper was scheduled to come to his office that day. She thought perhaps they had gone to a meeting or a government building where phones weren't allowed.

But as the day wore on, it became apparent something violent had occurred in the city. Reports came out that an American missionary had been killed but they didn't know of any Americans in the city. After a flurry of activity and phone calls from friends and neighbors, she realized that Tilmann was missing. Having retrieved two of her three children, she went to a local hospital to see if she could find him.

The hospital personnel seemed to know who she was before she arrived, yet she couldn't get a straight answer. After several hours of runarounds, she grabbed the arm of a Turkish official, something that females don't do in that country. Susanne demanded an answer. Then she learned that Tilmann had been murdered for his Christian faith along with a local pastor and another Muslim convert to Christianity. Five Muslim assailants had tortured her husband and his

friends in their small office before killing them. They declared that they were defending Turkish culture and Islam. Suddenly, Susanne and her children were plunged into a time of great spiritual darkness.¹

Where was God when all this happened? What is God doing during times of such darkness? Spiritual darkness is the absence of God's light or Gospel or witness or activity or community. It can be found in a place, an event, a time period or in people. Times of spiritual darkness can come into the lives of individuals, families, churches, communities, businesses, governments and nations. It can come because of tragedy like the Teske family experienced, or illness, our sins or the sins of others, the devil and the fallenness of the world.

When we find ourselves in spiritual darkness we can ask a lot of questions. Where is or was God? What is He doing especially when Christians carry out His work and something terrible happens? The next chapter of Revelation sheds some light on these questions.

Last time we were in Revelation, John had a vision of a Mighty Angel holding a little scroll. Through that vision, we learned that "the mystery of God" would be fulfilled. This is likely His eternal plan that leads up to the return of Christ, final judgment and life everlasting. The next section raises this question about God's activity during times of darkness. So today I want you to see first what God does during times of spiritual darkness and how He actually does it. Then I pray that seeing these actions of God will help us keep going when we are in spiritual darkness ourselves. We will then conclude with the rest of Susanne Teske's story.

Revelation 11:1-13 (ESV)

11 Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there,² but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months.³ And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth."

⁴These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. ⁶They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may 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 kind of plague, as often as they desire. ⁷And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them,⁸ and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. ⁹For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb,¹⁰ and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment

¹ <https://billygraham.org/decision-magazine/april-2017/the-ultimate-cost/> - accessed May 3, 2018

to those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. ¹² Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here!” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them. ¹³ And at 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.

This text presents significant interpretive challenges. Is it literal or symbolic? If literal, then John describes an actual temple in Jerusalem and two individual witnesses who will return there to prophesy, be killed and then resurrected. If symbolic, the temple may represent the church, the two witnesses are part of the church that must suffer martyrdom and the great city represents civilization opposed to the will of God. But with either interpretation, I think we can still find answers to our question “What is God doing and how will he do it during the spiritual darkness of the end?” I think we can extend God’s activity back into our time because He has consistently acted this way throughout history.

So “**What is God doing during times of spiritual darkness?**” I believe this passage teaches us that **God preserves His people and witness**. Now when I use the word preserve, I am not talking about jams and jelly in jars. God doesn’t put us into glass jars to preserve us during darkness. By preserve, I mean to protect – to ensure continuation – to intervene on behalf of and be involved in the furtherance of His people and witness. I could not get away from this preserving or protecting theme throughout the entire chapter despite the intense darkness and opposition to God and His people.

How does God preserve His people and witness? 1) He knows each one and prepares for their protection (11:1).

We get this from the image of the measuring rod in verse 1 where John is instructed to measure the temple and ? It goes back to the Old Testament prophets of Ezekiel and Zechariah. In Ezekiel 40:3, the prophet sees a man who holds a measuring reed in his hand.” This man goes on to measure a temple. In Zechariah 2:1, the prophet states “And I lifted my eyes and saw a man with a measuring line in his hand.” This man also goes on to measure Jerusalem.

What did their measuring mean? Well when Ezekiel prophesied, there was no temple in Jerusalem. It had been destroyed. So this heavenly man may have been measuring out a new temple to encourage the people that God would empower them to return to Jerusalem to build the second temple. Or it could symbolize that God would restore or rebuild His fallen people. Either way, the measuring is about keeping a promise. In Zechariah 2:1, the man measures Jerusalem for protection. God promises to be a wall of fire around the area measured. Zechariah 2:5.

Here in Revelation 11, it seems pretty clear that measuring also means protection. John is instructed to measure the temple of God and the altar. If he's talking about the heavenly temple and altar, no evil can assault God's throne room. But notice he must also measure the worshippers – the people of God. So God has each one measured.

Notice this occurs before the darkness arrives. In verse 2, he will describe the coming darkness. But in preparation for this darkness, God already takes measures to protect His people. Now think about that in your life. God sees everything. He knows what's coming both good and bad. But this verse gives us an image of a pro-active protecting God. Whatever spiritual darkness we are in or will go through, God knows about it before it happens. God does protecting work in advance. In the 23rd Psalm we read about God's shepherding, guiding, leading and restoring. And even when we go through the valley of the shadow of death, He is with us and comforts us. So God knows us and prepares for our protection through darkness.

2) He provides witnesses to speak during times of darkness (11:2-4). In verse 2, the voice tells John about a time of coming darkness. "But do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations and they will trample the holy city for 42 months." So the temple, the altar and the worshippers get protection in the temple. The outer court is not measured or protected. There, the nations will trample the holy city. This could mean a literally trampling of Jerusalem through invasion. ? Whatever it refers to, a time of oppression and suffering will come for the people of God.

But this time will be limited to 42 months or 3 and a half years. What could that time frame mean? Some think it is an number that symbolizes a divinely restricted period of oppression. Remember in Revelation 9 when the demonic hordes went out to do their terrible work? God placed limits on them and the extent of damage they could do. Here he limits the time of trampling.

The 42 months seems to go back to the book of Daniel where he talks about a time, times and half a time which equals 3 and a half years. There were some significant three and a half year events in Jewish history. Elijah stopped the rains from falling on Israel because of Ahab's wicked reign. Both Jesus and the book of James mention the drought lasted 3 and a half years. Later on a brutal Greek king named Antiochus Ephiphanes the fourth captured Jerusalem for three and a half years from 167-164 BC. During this time, he oppressed the Jews and desecrated the temple. In it he set up an

image to Zeus and sacrificed pigs there; an abomination to the Jews. This was a prime example of a Gentile trampling the holy city. In verse 2, John is told of another such time of coming spiritual darkness.

Yet God will not abandon the world to darkness. In verse 3 two witnesses appear. They receive authority to prophesy for 1260 days clothed in sackcloth. 1260 is 42 months multiplied by 30 days. So during the same timeframe when the nations trample the holy city, God commissions his two witnesses to prophecy. They wear sackcloth which was a dark colored fabric made of goat or camel hair originally used for making grain sacks. You wore sackcloth during times of mourning or national distress or in an attitude of repentance. Sackcloth was not exactly attractive clothing. The person wearing it recognized or proclaimed something. Sometimes prophets like Elijah and John the Baptist wore it to proclaim their call to repentance.

Who are these two witnesses? A strong case can be made that they come in the spirit of Elijah and Moses. Elijah never died. He was taken up directly into heaven. Moses was the lawgiver and though he died, they never found his body. The signs talked about in verses 5 and 6 can be traced back to the ministries of Moses and Elijah. Other more symbolic proposals say they are representative of the church and its witness during times of persecution.

John gives us clues about their heavenly commission when he refers to them as the two olive trees in verse 4. Now that might mean nothing to us. But listen to Zechariah 4 from the Old Testament.

Zechariah 4:1-3 (ESV)

4 And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who is awakened out of his sleep. ²And he said to me, "What do you see?" I said, "I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. ³And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left."

Zechariah 4:11-14 (ESV)

¹¹Then I said to him, "What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?" ¹²And a second time I answered and said to him, "What are these two branches of the olive trees . . . ¹³He said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" I said, "No, my lord." ¹⁴Then he said, "These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth."

So in Zechariah, the two olive trees are the two anointed ones. Here in Revelation, the two olive trees are two witnesses. So they are messengers from God to proclaim His word especially in a time of darkness. God will keep His witness going even during this future dark time.

But does God do that today? We have just gone through the dark time of the Humboldt Tragedy. What happened during that dark time? Thousands and maybe millions heard the chaplain's message the night of the first vigil. He proclaimed that Christ was still on the throne of the universe and God could be turned to for comfort and hope. In the dark times of our lives, God sends His witness to us. He might send a friend to comfort us. He might speak to us through prayer or through some word of Scripture. Or He might send you to be His light. You might be the witness that God has raised up for their time of darkness.

So God preserves His people and witness during times of darkness. He does this by knowing each one and preparing for their protection. He preserves His message in times of darkness by sending His witnesses.

3) He backs up His witnesses with power from heaven (11:5-6). God not only sends His witnesses into darkness. He backs them up with His protection and power. Verse 5 tells us about their protection. "And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes." I don't think this means literal flames come out of the mouths of the witnesses? It could refer to their words which call out fire. Or the prophet's words were sometimes like fire because of their strong message of warning. In either case, the fire protects them from those who want to harm them.

Then verse 6 tells us of the power they are given. They have power to shut up the sky so that no rain may fall. That reminds us of the time Elijah prayed and the skies shut for 3 and a half years. Verse 6 tells us they have power to turn water into blood or bring plagues on the earth. This reminds us of Moses and the signs the Lord performed through him. They use these powers to strike their enemies as often as they desire according to the end of verse 6.

God has backed up His witnesses with His power thru history. He anointed Peter and the others with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost when 3000 came to Christ. He gave the apostles power for signs and wonders during their ministry after the resurrection.

We also have received the Holy Spirit. He empowers us to discern between truth and error; to discover someone who needs prayer or help. We have access to the Lord's strengthening to continue in the faith even when most people around us reject it.

But then comes verses 7-10. It seems like everything is undone. Like God's protection and provision failed. The beast that rises from the bottomless pit comes to make war on the witnesses. He not only makes war. He conquers and kills them. This beast does not need description to John's first century readers. It is not "a" beast but "the" beast. It could

be Satan since he comes from the bottomless pit. Or it could be an agent of Satan like the anti-Christ that has some great power. But what happened to God's protection?

And things get worse. In verse 8, the dead witnesses remain unburied. They lay on a street of the great city. To leave a body unburied in the ancient world was a great indignity. It was an outrage and expressed great dishonor towards the deceased.

The world celebrates the death of the two witnesses. People from all tribes, nations and languages will not let them be buried. They rejoice in verse 10 and make merry and exchange presents. It's like they declare a national holiday because the witnesses have been struck dead. Why? End of verse 10 – "Because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth." The torment consisted of preaching repentance, exposing sin and announcing judgment. When God's witnesses remain faithful to the whole counsel of His Word, the world will not like it. So it seems like everything is lost. The witnesses are dead. The world celebrates. God's message has been stopped. What happened?

Well notice the first phrase of verse 7? And when they had *finished* their testimony, the beast conquered and killed them. They completed 1260 days. They had accomplished their mission. Their time was done. We learn again that in this fallen world, God's protection and preserving over us does not mean protection from our death. We will all die unless Christ returns. Yet God protects us until it's time for our death. When God's people die they continue to live in Christ's presence.

But what else often happens when Christian's die? God's witness gets proclaimed through their death. We saw this in the Humboldt Broncos crash through the death of the coach. He was a devout Christian who desired for his players to hear about Christ. Through his death, life in Christ is proclaimed. At Christian funerals, hope in Christ is proclaimed. And the ultimate example is Christ Himself. Through His death, we found life. Those parts of three days on Easter weekend seemed to be a time darkness won. But quickly death turned to life. **4) God continues His witness through the deaths of His people (11:7-10).** Did you notice how long these witnesses were dead? Three and a half days – a little longer than Christ yet short enough to stop the world's celebration in its tracks. This leads us to the final way God preserves His people and witness.

5) He will vindicate His witnesses by resurrecting them (11:11-12). The breath of life from God enters the witnesses in verse 11. They stand to their feet just like the dry bones did in Ezekiel 37. Great fear falls on those who saw

them. All the gloating, mocking and celebrating stops. The witnesses come to life. Then in verse 12 a voice from heaven says, “Come up here.” They are taken up into heaven while their enemies watch.

Resurrection is a pretty stunning answer to those who think they’ve silenced God’s message and messengers. The Chief Priests and rulers must have celebrated on Saturday of Easter weekend. They finally had gotten rid of Jesus. But Sunday the tomb was empty. Though they tried to silence the news, it has spread around the world for 2000 years since. You and I will one day die. But we also are promised resurrection upon Christ’s return. On that day, our witness will be vindicated. The truth of our faith will be revealed.

Then in verse 13, the ascension of the witnesses is followed by an earthquake that strikes the city. 7000 are killed. The survivors give glory to God. I don’t think this means conversion. I think it means they are forced to acknowledge that the Lord is the only true God.

So God ultimately preserves and protects His people and witness. It continues through darkness, opposition, mockery and death. So how are we to live in the light of this reality? **God preserves His witnesses so we can spread His light in darkness.** You know people who currently walk in darkness. They’re going through a hard time. They can’t see God. Or they’re searching for something. Maybe God is calling you to prayerfully speak into their lives with hope. Or maybe He calls you to minister to them with your gifts. Or maybe they need to hear the light of the Gospel.

Maybe some of you walk in darkness and have not received the light of Jesus Christ into your life. I appeal to you to come to Him – to turn from the darkness and following your own sins – and to turn to Christ. Through your faith, God will pour His Gospel into your life. You will be forgiven and declared not guilty forever. You will be adopted into God’s family. You will receive the Holy Spirit. You will begin a journey of life with Christ as your Lord, Shepherd and Savior. If you want to do that please come to the front after the service and there will be people to pray with you.

Christian, will you receive what God has for you in this text for your encouragement. When I read this text I was so encouraged that Jesus watches out for you and prepares for your protection. He’s got your back and His eternal resources to support you. He sends people to you or speaks to you through your own times of darkness. With the Lord before and behind His, we can bring His light to the darkness around us even when the darkness has struck us very personally.

Back to the story of Susanne Teske. Upon finding out that her husband had been murdered, she returned to their home with her three children. She writes, “the next few days were a blur but God used the common grace and decency

of our lost neighbors to meet our needs. In fact, our Muslim neighbors practically did everything for several weeks in our household – meals, chores and providing constant companionship. The love we had shown them was returned to us in full.” She was also interviewed on Turkish TV and proclaimed forgiveness for her husband’s murderers.

But she went through dark times. “Unable to sleep well after Tilmann’s death, I recall rising in the middle of the night and finding strength in the words of Psalm 119—the lengthy meditation on the Word of the Lord. I realized that I had been leaning too heavily on Tilmann’s faith. Over the next weeks and months, God taught me a rich lesson: He wanted me to dive deeply into His Word, not merely feed off of Tilmann’s rich knowledge of Scripture. Ten minutes in the morning would no longer do. He called me to plumb the depths.

I also sensed, after listening to a sermon on Job, that God trusted me enough to take Tilmann from us. Only a week or so after he was murdered, our oldest daughter, who was 13, boldly announced to me that she believed we needed to stay in Turkey and finish the work that her father had started. So while several other missionary families were quickly called home, we opted to stay and continue our work. And God has been tremendously faithful to us.

Ten years later, I am still working in Turkey a good portion of the year while also living in Germany for several months at a time as my children emerge into adulthood. The work in Turkey is no easier than it was; in many ways it is more difficult as anti-Christian tensions mount. But like Jesus instructed, we will take up our cross and follow Him. The costs are high. There is no cheap way to follow Him. But if you really love the people you go to, and you love the Lord, it doesn’t matter. Ultimately, all is in the Lord’s hands. He is a loving, caring and faithful Lord. He has proven that to us—over and over again.” ©2017 Susanne Geske. He will protect and preserve His people and His witness until He returns.