



## Session 12 ■ Special Interest Topic 1

# The Failure of the French Revolution

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Many today see the French Revolution, which began with the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, as a turning point in history. This event was not only a revolt against the upper classes of society but also, against the Christian church.

It was obvious that the king and nobility of France were exploiting the poor; but it was just as true to say that the church in France also had departed from the simplicity of the good news about Jesus Christ. The king supported the church and the church supported the divine right of kings; together, they exploited the lower classes.

For many years before, philosophers such as Voltaire and Rousseau had laid the foundation for some kind of reform. No doubt some reform was needed and when it did come, some French Catholic clergy welcomed it at first as a genuine reformation of their church.

However, as time progressed, it went much further than many had anticipated. It became a rejection of religion and God altogether, replacing them with atheism. Many people felt atheism would liberate humanity from the tyranny, war and oppression that came from religious origins. It was said the path to happiness was found in the elimination of belief in God, and the brave new world ahead would be grounded in nature and reason.

For the first time in modern history, an atheistic state was set up as they produced a Declaration of the Rights of Man. However, this was followed by a reign of terror. Without the restraining influence of belief in God, the society went into anarchy under the radical Jacobin faction. The National Assembly nationalised church properties and terror tactics were used against clergy and nobility. Anyone perceived as opposing the revolution was eliminated. France was being forcibly de-Christianised.

Within a decade, Napoleon took control and ended it all by setting up a new constitution. Now the French Revolution was seen as a failed experiment with atheism.

The French were admirers of the American Revolution and thought they could do the same. However, the Americans saw religion as their ally and not the enemy. They sought to put it in its rightful place by separating it from politics, not by eliminating it.

In 1917, Russia had a revolution not unlike the French. Again, there was bloodshed and anarchy as they sought to eliminate religion and belief in God.

Both the French and Russian revolutions illustrate the cruelty in human nature when belief in God is eliminated.

Revelation 11 portrays the prophecy of the putting to death of the two witnesses and warns us that, at the end time, these elements of human nature will once again break out against the followers of Jesus.

With the close of the prophetic 1260 days, Revelation 11 also portrays a dying world receiving a final message. Around the time of the French Revolution, many people saw the events of their day forecast in this text. They believed that the attack on the two witnesses represented the atheist onslaught against the Bible during the revolution. They saw in the two witnesses imagery a reminder of Moses and Elijah, who represent the Law and the Prophets. To the early church (in the time of John), this expression indicated the Old Testament; however, from a perspective many centuries later, it would also indicate the New Testament. This is because the church had access to both, witnessing to the good news about Jesus.

But God reverses this shame by breathing the breath of life back into the two witnesses. Their resurrection fills their enemies with great fear. One of the consequences of the French Revolution was a great revival of interest in the Bible. Great Bible societies organised during the following decades. So while this attack occurred in the 1790s, the 1800s saw the Bible spread more widely than any other time in history.

The French Revolution and its attack upon religion did have a powerful affect upon Christians who lived at that time in other countries. The events that took place during the French Revolution serve as a warning to what can happen when anti-Christian forces take control of society.