



Part 15 – The Voice of the Martyrs

Revelation 6:9-11

The section of Revelation which begins in chapter six presents readers with not only interpretive challenges but also significant theological questions related to God's judgment and mercy. One of the things we learn is that for justice to be done, particular acts of judgment are required. Justice is not an abstract idea but a reality that God is bringing about. We learn also that God's mercy is not undermined by his

purposes to judge the impenitent and those who murder his people. The passage being considered today concerns the cries of the martyrs, those killed for their faithfulness to Christ. They cry out for justice and God promises to deliver it.

Every month an average of 373 Christians are killed for reasons connected to their faith in Christ. Each month 640 churches or Christian buildings are burned or attacked, while 395 Christians are detained without trial. In 2018 *Newsweek* reported "Christian persecution and genocide is worse now than any time in history," and the trend does not seem to be slowing. Christians are being targeted for harassment. They are imprisoned, beaten, raped, hung, crucified, shot, and bombed. The dangers Christians face in places like Syria, Somalia, Yemen, Nigeria, India, and Pakistan are chronic and ongoing with the number of the martyrs multiplying daily.

1. Why are Christians killed?

This passage concerns those who are killed at least in part for their faith in Christ. The murderous rage against Christians, which is known in every generation, is a subset of the hatred Satan, and thus the world, has for God and for his Christ.

Vs. 9 – "When he opened the fifth seal..." – When the Lamb opens the fifth seal the perspective shifts from earth to heaven. Remember, the seals, like the trumpets and the bowls to follow, are symbolic of God's judgment. Here, there is the promise of judgment upon those who have persecuted unto death the people of God

"...I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain..." – The altar was indispensable in the people's service to God as it represented what was required for sinners to gain access to God. The tabernacle and later the temple had two altars. One was in the courtyard and was used for offering animals as sacrifices. The other altar was located in the Holy Place and positioned immediately before the veiled entrance into the Holy of Holies (Exodus 27:1-8; 30:1-10; Hebrews 9:3-4). From the symbolic altar in his vision, John hears the cries of the saints' who have been martyred (Rev. 8:3; 16:6-7).

Connecting the souls of the martyrs to the altar is a way of saying that their deaths are a kind of sacrifice pleasing to God. Their deaths are not atoning (That belongs to Jesus alone). Rather, they died as sacrifices of faithfulness to Christ offered to God. The Apostle Paul wrote of his coming death as an offering. On another occasion he made reference of his death as a sacrifice. Jesus described the life of a disciple as carrying a cross.

"...for the word of God and for the witness they had borne." – This formula is used four times in Revelation (1:2, 9; 6:9; 20:4) with 12:17 and 14:12 paraphrasing the same idea.¹ The two "reasons" for their martyrdom are nearly identical. In both cases what is being communicated is their obedience to God and their public witness to Christ. The church is irreducibly a witnessing body. Therefore, persecution is fixed to the church so long as she is in the world.

2. Why do the martyred saints in heaven cry out for justice rather than mercy?

Vs. 10 – "They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true..." – God is addressed in terms of his absolute power, moral purity, and faithfulness. He alone has the authority and power to enact justice upon those who have persecuted his people.

"...How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" – The cry of the martyrs uses language we see in the Lament and Imprecatory Psalms. Their prayer from the altar is for

¹ Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) p. 285

justice and vindication. Their “how long?” is not a question of *whether* the Lord will vindicate them, but *when*. Some readers may be troubled by this prayer, wondering why these martyrs do not pray for the forgiveness of their murderers as Jesus and, later, Stephen did. One commentator goes so far as to say that it is not a Christian prayer. But, in fact, this prayer to God for the vindication of his people is a prayer we find very often in the Psalms. In fact the wording here is an allusion to **Psalm 79:10**: “make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.” It is a prayer based on the Lord’s own promise to vindicate his people.

- Far from an “ethical low,” the prayer of the martyrs is tied to the imprecatory prayers of David as he called out for God’s justice. Their prayer is also in keeping with Paul’s words in **Romans 12:19**: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” Jesus declared: “And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily...” (**Luke 18:7-8**).
- Certainly, it is true that Christians are to love even their enemies and to pray for those who curse them (**Matthew 5:43-44**). But that distinctively Christian virtue is not in conflict with the desire for justice to be done. Indeed, as we read on in the Book of Revelation we will see the saints in heaven rejoice over God’s ultimate victory over the wicked (**Revelation 19:1-5**). The Scriptures never teach us that God will not or should not judge the wicked only that we must leave all wrath to him. Our responsibility so long as God’s mercy extends in this world is to be heralds of that mercy in Jesus. But the Lord has promised to judge the wicked. It is no sin to pray that the Lord will do what he has promised.

3. Are we willing to be numbered among the martyrs?

Vs. 11 – “Then they were given a white robe...” – The horror of the dread riders in the previous passage is answered by the assurance of the vindication of the martyrs symbolized in their white robes of victory.² The riders are given the sword temporarily (vs. 8) but the martyrs are given the garment of victory forever. We are reminded of the white robes given the persecuted saints in Sardis (3:4-5) and the white garments of the 24 elders (4:4). The white robes indicate faithfulness and honor. The garments are also connected to the righteousness of Christ which is imputed to the saints.³

“...and told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.” – Jesus gives an answer to the “When?” question. The Lamb will return to avenge the blood of his faithful ones at the moment that the final martyr lays down his or her life. Elsewhere Jesus ties the timing of his return to the advance of the gospel: “The gospel must first be preached to all the nations...” (**Mark 13:10**). The Apostle Paul writes that God is currently bearing with sinners patiently (**Romans 2:4**). The Apostle Peter sounds a similar note, writing that “God is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (**2 Peter 3:9**). But God’s patience comes at a cost to the church:

“Accompanying the world-wide spread of God’s good news, however, is the prolonged affliction of the church that bears this joyful message. The days on God’s calendar are marked off, one by one, in the blood of the martyrs.”⁴

Scripture holds forth the murder of God’s people as a particularly heinous evil. This passage demonstrates that God holds as very precious the lives of his saints (**Psalm 116:15**). And yet there is a mystery in that the unfolding of redemptive history involves the martyrdom of many of those who trust in him. There is mystery here to be sure. But we are also able to see with the church fathers that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Through their sacrifice God both amplifies the gospel and puts on display the glory of his mercy and justice.

The souls beneath the altar bear witness to this. They are the casualties of a great war and there will be many others like them before that war has been finally and decisively brought to its end. But that it will end in victory and vindication for the followers of Jesus Christ is an absolute certainty of human history. The Lamb himself, the Son of God, is breaking the seals!

² Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 126

³ Osborne, p. 288

⁴ Johnson, p. 126