

How Long, O Lord?  
Revelation 6:9-11  
2/22/2015

Tertullian, the early church father, once said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. When the blood of the martyrs mounts high to the throne of God, we can be sure that God is about to do great things here on earth. This passage is about the martyrs, those who have sealed their witness for God with their blood. However, what we primarily see here is not what they do on earth, but what they are doing in heaven. As Douglas Kelly puts it,

Once the saints have been martyred, they do not lose their effectiveness in changing the course of world history...To rid themselves of the testimony of these believers, who were showing up the darkness of the evil works of sinners by their humble and holy lives, the world system said, 'Let's dispatch them. Then we shall be rid of their annoying influence, and our lives will no longer be disturbed by their Christian testimony.' But look at what actually has happened: they have only dispatched them to a place of tremendous authority that they can now exercise near their heavenly father's heart in heaven, as they are praying (from his commentary on Revelation, pp. 125-126).

What can the martyrs do in heaven? They have a place of prayer right under the altar. This is the first thing we notice, and it is a very important point. The souls of those slain for their witness to the faith are under the altar. We learn from other places in Revelation that the altar is right next to the throne of God. These martyrs are extremely close to the throne of God. Their prayers do not have to travel far to reach God.

They have a ministry of intercession for those still on earth. They pray for justice and vengeance. And that is how they still affect world history. They intercede for the saints. They cry aloud for justice. In other words, they have a very powerful position in heaven, one that deeply affects the world. One is reminded a little bit of what Obi Wan Kenobi tells Darth Vader during their battle near the end of Star Wars that if Darth strikes him down, he will only become more powerful than he was before. If the world powers were smart about this, they would not martyr Christians for their faith, since they only help the Christian cause in the world through doing so. However, world powers have never been smart about this. In fact, they seem intent on killing as many Christians as they can. It is no coincidence that the greatest and fastest growth of the Christian church is happening hand in hand with the greatest number of martyrdoms the world has ever seen. Instead, if the powers that be want Christianity to die out, they should lure Christianity into the regions of comfort and sensuality, like what is happening in the West. A fat and lazy church is no threat to Satan. However, the persecuted

church, which has to rely solely on the power of God, is a very great threat to Satan, as are the saints who are martyred, and intercede now for the church.

The question arises as to whether only those actually martyred for their faith are under the altar, or whether more might be included. Scholar G.K. Beale makes a good case for being a bit more inclusive in terms of the people who are included under the altar. In chapter 20, the “martyrs” appear to be all those who have died believing in Jesus Christ. At any rate, we could surely include all those who have suffered in one way or the other because of their Christian witness. This is surely a comfort to those of us who have suffered for being a Christian, and I have heard many stories already of people in this very church who have suffered for being a Christian. Know this: that suffering is never in vain. Our God will always use it to increase His kingdom here on earth.

Many people have asked whether vengeance is a good thing to request. Here is what one commentator says about it:

The martyrs cry out, 'How long, O Master, holy and true, will you wait before you pass judgment and bring justice for our blood, which was shed by those who live on the earth?' (Rev. 6:10). When read in the context of other Christian writings, this call for judgment on the people of earth seems to fall short of the idea of loving one's enemies and praying for one's persecutors, as Jesus was said to have done (Matt. 5:44; Luke 23:34; cf. Acts 7:60; Rom 12:19). Yet the way the plea is heard depends on where one stands (Boxall). In Revelation the plea for justice is uttered by the victims of injustice, and the assumption is that a just God cannot allow violence against the faithful to prevail..If God is 'true,' as the martyrs confess him to be, the question becomes: Does God turn away while the wicked shed the blood of the innocent? Is mercy another name for indifference? (Koester, p. 410).

We can confidently answer that God is the one who brings justice. When we see Christians being martyred or mistreated, we do not need to seek out vengeance ourselves. Nor should we think of their work as ended. Instead, they become more powerful than they were before, for now they can offer prayers to God without any sin attached to those prayers. Overall, therefore, we can say that the more martyrs there are for the Christian faith, the stronger the kingdom of God becomes. God's mercy does not cancel out God's justice. God will make all things right in the end.

Let me hasten to add that this does not mean that we should seek out martyrdom. The Bible never tells us to invent a death-wish for ourselves. Instead, it encourages us that if this kind of suffering were to come our way, we need not fear it.

We don't even need to fear death. Christ has taken the sting out of death. He has created this situation where death only makes us stronger prayer warriors for God's kingdom. What an encouragement to the first readers of this letter, who were facing the very martyrdom that John describes here!

The answer to the question “how long?” is two-fold. First, they are given a white robe. This has a great significance. As G.K. Beale says, “The robes are not given as a reward for purity of faith but as a heavenly declaration of the saints' purity or righteousness and as an annulment of the guilty verdict rendered against them by the world. Therefore, receiving the robes is an assurance to the petitioning saints that the unbelieving 'earth-dwellers' will be declared guilty and punished for persecuting them.” The robes are directly relevant to the request of the saints. God has not forgotten them while they are under the altar. Instead, He gives them His assurance that the world will be judged. The world is guilty, not the martyrs. The world carried out its sentence of execution, you see. The world judged the Christians to be unworthy of life. The white robes are given by God to assure the believers that they have been made worthy of life eternal. Christ's martyrdom, you see, underlies our martyrdom. These martyrs have followed in the noble path set for them by their Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The second part of the answer is the gentle reminder that they “rest a little longer.” Rest in the Bible always indicates God's favor. It indicates that the battle belongs to the Lord. But it also implies, in this context, at least, that the current inaction will not be permanent. There will come a day when those martyrs will rise up again with new bodies in the resurrection. When the number of martyrs is fulfilled, then will come Jesus Christ in all His glory at the second coming to judge the living and the dead. After that, the martyrs will be very busy indeed. The new heavens and the new earth will be full of work for the saints to do. But it will be work without any frustration whatsoever, where our every endeavor will be completely dedicated to God, and will always be crowned with success.

There are several ways that we can apply this text to our lives. Firstly, and most importantly, there is a call to gospel faith here. The only way that we can be in the position of being able to see death and martyrdom the way this passage sees it is if we belong body and soul to the Lord Jesus Christ. He died so that we might have eternal life. He took the sting out of death. He is the ultimate reason why we need not fear death.

Secondly, we need every encouragement possible in the fight against sin. Is it not a great encouragement to us to know that these martyrs pray for us? On the negative side, do you really want to fall into that sin that you know some martyr or other has died rather than commit? Do you want to fall into that sin when you should be praying for your persecuted brothers and sisters all around the world here and now?

Thirdly, just as the souls in heaven pray for us, we also need to pray for one another. We do not need to pray for the dead. However, we most definitely need to pray for the living. We need to pray for the persecuted church. However, we often pray for the wrong thing. I well remember a leader of a Chinese house church coming over to the US, and telling the church not to pray that the persecution

would end. For, he said, the persecution is the best thing for the church. It unifies the church, and makes it know what it really believes. Instead, as he said, we should pray that those being persecuted will be brave, and will hold fast their confession even unto the end. We should pray that the Lord will give them the grace they need at the time they need it in order to hold fast. Of course, the main temptation that the persecuted Christian faces is to deny their Lord. If someone were to come up to us and hold a gun to our heads, and say, "Are you a follower of Christ? If you say yes, then I will blow your head off," then the obvious temptation will be to say that we are not followers of Christ. We need to pray that the millions who face that exact situation will be content with the martyr's crown. We need to pray that if we ever face that situation (and it has been faced by many people in the US already) that we will hold fast and not deny our Lord. I will close with some stories of famous martyrs.

The most famous martyr of all time is undoubtedly Stephen. His story is told in Acts 6-7 (read Acts 6:8-15 and 7:51-60).

Simon Peter the Apostle is well-known as having been crucified. According to tradition, he requested that he be crucified upside-down, as he did not count himself worthy of being martyred in the same way as his Master.

Only slightly less well-known than these two martyrs is Polycarp (A.D. 70-155), bishop of Smyrna and a godly man. He had known the apostle John personally. When he was urged by the Roman proconsul to renounce Christ, Polycarp said: "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" "I have respect for your age," said the official. "Simply say, 'Away with the atheists!' and be set free." The aged Polycarp pointed to the pagan crowd and said, "Away with the atheists!" He was burned at the stake and gave joyful testimony of his faith in Jesus Christ.

The most well-known modern martyr is Jim Elliot. Jim Elliot, along with four of his missionary colleagues was killed on January 8, 1956 while trying to establish contact with the Auca Indians in Ecuador (now known as the Waodani people). Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Pete Flemming and Roger Youderian had been working to make friendly contact with the Auca tribe which they had seen from the air. Though they had only met one tribesman face to face, they had participated in trades with the Auca from a plane to ground system. When Elliot and his friends landed on a river beach on that fateful January day they were slaughtered by the waiting men. Their deaths were not in vain though. The widows continued to try and make peaceful contact and eventually won the hearts of the tribe. God has used this recent missionary martyr story to inspire new generations of missionaries willing to give their lives for what they believe.

Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed on June 9, 1945. I hesitated to include Bonhoeffer in this list because he was not martyred strictly for his Christian beliefs. He was executed because of his involvement in the July 20 Plot

to kill Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer staunchly opposed Hitler's treatment of the Jews. As a Christian pastor he could not sit idly by and watch the murder of so many men and women. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged just two weeks before soldiers from the United States liberated the concentration camp in which he was held.

There is a great and mighty company of martyrs like these, who are not well-known by us, but very well-known by God. Of them this world is not worthy. And that is the message of our text.