

The Cry Of The Martyrs: Was It Answered?

By Phillip G. Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2016-04-03

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Text - Revelation 6:9-11

9 And when He opened the fifth seal I saw underneath the altar the souls of the people who had been slaughtered on account of the Word of God and on account of the testimony of the Lamb which they held. 10 And they cried out with a loud voice saying, "How long, O Sovereign, Holy and True, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the land?" 11 So a white robe was given to each of them, and they were told that they should rest a while longer, until both their fellow slaves and their brothers, who were about to be killed just like they were, should complete the number.¹

Introduction - tying this paragraph in with the rest of the book

A. Review of chapter 6

This passage gives some incredibly comforting theology for the persecuted church. And we will definitely spend some time on that later in the sermon. But before I even start opening up *that* subject, I want to explain four things that I believe will make the rest of the book easier to understand. It will take about 25 minutes to go through the introduction in a 45 minute sermon, but most of the stuff I am sharing in this introduction will be foundational for understanding the later chapters. We are building brick upon brick.

The first first part of the introduction will deal with the timing. The first two words in the Greek of verse 9 are literally "And *then*" - not "and when," but "and then." And those words indicate an immediate sequence. So I will start this morning by giving a three minute review of the first eight verses so that you can be convinced of the exact date that this section starts.

Second, since the Great Tribulation begins in these verses, I want to give an overview of how this passage relates to the rest of the book. And that will be the chart on the back of your outlines.

Third, since these verses imply that "the land" (in other words, Israel) brought the persecution, and because so many other verses in Revelation make that connection explicit, I want to show the Jewish connection to the Great Tribulation. Later Israel will be portrayed as the harlot who rides the Beast, Nero, and uses him to persecute Christians. But their control of Nero started in the year that verse 9 begins with. And that is why I really need to set the groundwork with a longer introduction. There is a convergence of a

¹ Translation of the Majority Text by Wilbur M. Pickering.

large number of events that led to this tribulation.

And then fourthly, I will take about a minute or two to make a couple of comments about imminence.

First, let's look at the connection of this paragraph to what has gone before. We saw that chapters 4-5 take John back to Christ's ascension to the throne of the Father at 30 AD. So we would expect that the next historical event would start that year. And it does.

We saw that the first demonic horse rider of chapter 6 was sent forth to afflict the emperor Tiberius, and he does so. This demon didn't go forth in the earlier part of Tiberius' reign, but between the years of AD 30 and AD 37. And there was a switch in his personality at that time.

The next demonic rider of verses 3-4 was allowed to afflict Caligula during his reign of AD 37-39. And we saw how perfectly the symbols and details of those two verses fit Caligula.

Now people have wondered why there is a gap in time between Caligula and Claudius. Why does verse 4 end in AD 37 and verse 5 starts in AD 41? Well, Caligula was so hated at the end of his reign, that it took a while before the Senate was willing to install any emperor, so there was a gap between AD 39 and 41. But finally in AD 41, Claudius was installed as emperor, and he reigned until 54. He is the emperor that has so many coins showing him holding a pair of scales in his hand. And we saw that the so-called economic justice was a form of economic Fascism that was very harmful to Rome. It was one of God's judgments on Rome.

The fourth demonic horseman actually had another demon riding with him, and both of those demonic leaders infected the heart of Nero in AD 54. And we saw that the language of verses 7-8 very clearly ties that section to the early part of his reign, AD 54-61. And you might wonder, "Why did Phil end verse 8 in AD 61?" And there are several reasons. AD 54-61 was the time period that he minted the horse coins that were debased with copper and which turned green very quickly. So he is associated with the green horseman. Those coins were not minted later in his reign. That was also the period of time when he minted coins that identified himself with the god Thanatos (the Greek word translated as "Death" here) and with the god Hades. And this verse indicate that Death and Hades were the names of the two demons who infected Nero. So there is a perfect match between the fourth horseman and Nero via the coins that would have been in everyone's pockets. They would have picked up on these identifications very very

quickly. But the important point is that these particular coins represent the early part of his reign - AD 54-61. We saw the techniques used by antiquities experts to date all of these coins. And so the symbols give us a real precision to the dating of each seal.

B. The relationship of the Great Tribulation to the Great Wrath (see chart on reverse)

So that makes the fifth seal of verse 9 start in AD 62. And that is a very important date to understand for the book of Revelation. That year started the Great Tribulation. The church had always had some persecution, but never on the level that it had in year AD 62 and following. And John will continue discussing the Great Tribulation all the way through to the end of chapter 7, which is part way through AD 66, when the Great Tribulation was cut short. It was intended to last longer by both Israel and Rome, but as Jesus words it in Matthew 24, it was cut short for the sake of the elect.

I put a chart into your outlines that I may regret having given to you so early in the book. It does raise a level of complexity that might be confusing this early. But if you get confused, anchor your eyes on the green shaded boxes which represent a seven year covenant that Rome made with Israel and that was supposed to have lasted from AD 62-70. That is probably the most relevant section that we are going to be talking about through the end of chapter 7.

But for those of you who like the big picture, let me try to explain some oddities that have led to different views on the relationship of the Great Tribulation to the Great Wrath. I think it will help you to be sympathetic to the different views out there, but it will also help you to see why it fits together rather well.

Some commentaries confuse the the Great Tribulation with the Great Wrath. In other words, they confuse the green box and the yellow box. And you can see why - they overlap. Others distinguish the Great Tribulation from the Great Wrath properly, but they see the whole period as occurring concurrently. So they do understand that the Great Tribulation is against Christians and the Great Wrath against Israel, but they see them as happening at the same time. And that is understandable too - especially with the different numbers at the bottom of the chart. Others have Daniel's seventieth week only in the green box of the Great Tribulation. Others (like myself) have Daniel's seventieth week starting three and a half years into the

Great Tribulation and being only the yellow box. So this is one of the most confusing topics when trying to harmonize Daniel with Revelation. I believe that Daniel and Revelation are quite precise in their time measurements and all of the pieces do fit together quite well. But you do have to pay attention to all the time markers.

Now, if you go to the bottom of the chart you will notice some remarkable "coincidences" in history that have made people jump to wrong conclusions. (At least in my opinion they have.) You will notice that there is a 1290 day period that some have referenced that goes up till the day that the Roman general Titus appears in Israel. That has made some people interpret all references to the 1290 days in Scripture to that period. But there is also a 1290 day period from the date of the burning of the temple till hostilities against Jews ceased empire wide. Then there is a 1335 day period that begins in the month of Av in AD 62 and ends the day that Titus began his siege of Jerusalem. Well, some people interpret that as the 1335 days referenced in Daniel 12, and you can see why. But the problem is, if you look in the history books you will see there is also an exact 1335 days from the burning of the temple until the day that Masada fell in the wilderness. I think that is the **only** 1335 that the Scripture had in mind. The temple was burned on August 3, 70 AD, and Masada fell 1335 days later on March 30, 74 AD.² And then there are two 1260 day periods that need to be factored in. But I also want you to notice two time periods, both of which are seven years long. That has led people to put all of their eggs into one basket. And understandably so. When you see a historical seven year period that fits some of the evidence, it is easy to force all of the evidence into either the green box or the yellow box.

Let me focus first of all on the view of several early church fathers. They saw everything as being fulfilled in that green box. The green box represents a seven year covenant between Rome and Israel that is referenced by church fathers.³ Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Ambrosiaster, Isidore of Seville, Isho'dad of Merv, Andrew of Saint Victor, and Peter of Bloise are some of

2 See Gaalya Cornfeld (ed.), *Josephus: The Jewish War*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 505 for the more recent scholarship that dates the fall of Massada in 74 AD, not 73.

3 Various church fathers reference a seven year covenant between Vespasian and/or Titus and the Jews. The historical background that they cite has been lost, but they treat it as history that they were familiar with. Andrew of Saint Victor (died around 1175) said, "The Roman emperor Vespasian with Titus his son made a pact of peace with those who ruled among the Jews, or composed a pact of peace with many of the Jews and effected truces for seven years." Andrew of Saint Victor, *Exposition of Daniel*, on Daniel 9:27, CCCM, 53F:100. In future sermons I will likely reference quotes from Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Ambrosiaster, Isidore of Seville, Isho'dad of Merv, Andrew of Saint Victor, and Peter of Bloise are some of the early church fathers, all of whom reference this seven year period from 62-70 AD.

the early church fathers who place Daniel's seventieth week (in other words, Daniel's last seven-year prophetic period) as stretching from AD 62 to 70. And some modern writers do so as well. And it is true that Rome's covenant with Israel gets broken smack dab in the middle when Israel stops their daily sacrifice for Nero. That coincidence just seemed too great to be a coincidence in the minds of some people, so they tie Daniel's seventieth week with the treaty of Rome from 62-70.

And I respect that opinion. I think it is wrong, but at least it understands that we have to account for seven years in both Daniel 11-12 and in the book of Revelation. Many modern preterists fail to see that. And what is particularly attractive about the viewpoint of those early church fathers is that there is a perfect and uncomplicated symmetry. It's much more simple than my view. It's what makes it attractive. On their view, the first half of the seven years was the Great Tribulation against Christians and the second half of the seven years was the war ending in the destruction of Jerusalem. And honestly, I wish their mapping out of the seven years would work because it is so simple and easy to explain.

Now, I do not at all question the historical covenant that Rome and Israel made with each other in 62 AD. And I don't question that Israel was authorized by Rome to persecute Christians and to kill them for a period of seven years. I have several lines of historical evidence that show Rome taking away Israel's right to the death penalty in AD 30 and then restoring it for seven years in AD 62 and then removing it again in 70 AD.⁴ So there

4 This conclusion is reached from a number of strands of evidence:

1. The right of capital punishment was removed in AD 30. The Talmud declares numerous times (Sanh. 41a; Sabb. 15a; Aboda Zara 8b; Rosh Hashana 31a bottom; Mechilta de R. Simon p126; J. Sanh. I, 1, 18a; VII, 2, 24b; Nachamanides to Numbers xxxv, 29.) that Israel lost the right of capital punishment forty years before the temple was destroyed, or in AD 30.
2. The right of capital punishment was exercised in AD 62 by Anan against James, the brother of Jesus. See Josephus Antiquities, 20:200. Also see David de Sola Pool, *Capital Punishment Among the Jews*, (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1916) for proof that this was a lawful exercise of capital punishment and not an illegal act. Unfortunately, Pool fails to realize that the seven year period from 62-70 AD constituted a reinstatement of capital punishment and therefore he thinks that the death penalty continued unabated until 70 AD. But the overwhelming evidence (including Biblical evidence - cf. John 18:31) is that between AD 30 and AD 62, the right to impose the death penalty was removed by Rome, and then was reinstated by Rome.
3. Rabbi Kleazar (who was still a young man in AD 70) witnessed the burning of the high priest's daughter.
4. R. Joseph, R. Hiyya, and the school of Hezekiah all said that the Roman government allowed capital punishment up to 70 AD, but that after that date the Jewish courts were no longer allowed to do so.
5. Both the Didascalia and Origen state that the Roman government had removed the right of capital punishment in the first century. Didascalia ch. vi, 6; xix, 2.
6. Various church fathers reference a seven year covenant between Vespasian and/or Titus and the Jews. The historical background that they cite has been lost, but they treat it as history that they

clearly was a seven year agreement between Rome and Israel. I think those church fathers got that right. The only thing I question is whether that was Daniel's seventieth week. I see Daniel's 70th week as lasting from AD 66-AD 73, and the 1335 days extending a few days beyond that into March 30 of 74. As I pointed out in my Daniel series, the facts of history mesh perfectly with the facts of Daniel.

So if you have studied some of this historical background, you might wonder how I explain the fact that there are two periods of 1290 days, two periods of 1260 days, and two periods of 1335 days, and two historically verifiable periods that last seven years long. How do I explain that? They are rather odd coincidences of history. And we are not even talking about exegesis here - we are talking about strange "coincidences" in history. I have seen commentaries who try to fit everything into the green box on your chart, and I have seen others who try to fit everything into the yellow box. But really, both of those boxes are addressed by Scripture and all of those dates fit the facts as recorded in the Bible.

You see, here is what was going on: The yellow box represents the seven years that Daniel predicted that Rome would fight against Israel. But the green box shows how Satan came up with his own seven year plan to exterminate the church - only he started three and a half years early. So the green box shows this diabolical treaty between Rome and Israel that allowed Jewish leaders to do two things: 1) For the first time in over 30 years, Jews were once again allowed to exercise the death penalty for blasphemy, apostasy, and other capital crimes that had been prohibited to Israel from AD 30 and on. The historical record clearly shows that Israel exercised that right from AD 62-70, and church fathers attribute that to a seven year treaty with Rome. 2) The second thing that Rome allowed the Jewish leaders to do was to use those laws to exterminate the church. This was no longer a *persecution* of Christians; this was an authorized attempt at a genocide of the church.

were familiar with. Andrew of Saint Victor (died around 1175) said, "The Roman emperor Vespasian with Titus his son made a pact of peace with those who ruled among the Jews, or composed a pact of peace with many of the Jews and effected truces for seven years." Andrew of Saint Victor, *Exposition of Daniel*, on Daniel 9:27, CCCM, 53F:100. Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Ambrosiaster, Isidore of Seville, Isho'dad of Merv, Andrew of Saint Victor, and Peter of Bloise all reference a seven year period from 62-70 AD.

7. In his history of Herod the Great, Gerard Gertoux shows how in the years leading up to 66 AD, when Rome put the kabash on a lot of Jewish rights, Israel was once again granted the right to execute Christians if they were convicted of the crime of blasphemy, and they could flog those who were guilty of leaving Judaism. Gerard Gertoux, *Herod the Great and Jesus: Chronological, Historical and Archaeological Evidence*, (LULU, 2015 PhD thesis), p. 134.

C. The Jewish origins of the Great Tribulation (vv. 9b, 10d)

And that leads to the next part of the introduction. That treaty explains why the early church fathers blamed Nero's persecution on the leadership of the Jews. It also explains why both the reference to the altar and the reference to "the land" are two of numerous references in this book to Jewish persecution. Chilton says of the altar,

If the martyrs' blood is flowing around the base of the altar, it must be the priests of Jerusalem who have spilled it. The officers of the Covenant have slain the righteous. As Jesus and the apostles testified, Jerusalem was *the* murderer of the prophets (Matt. 23:34-37; Luke 13:33; Acts 7:51-52). The connection with the blood of Abel crying out from the ground near the altar (Gen. 4:10) is another indication that this passage as a whole refers to judgment upon Jerusalem (cf. Matt. 23:35-37).⁵

And John's use of the temple term for "slaughter" would tend to support Chilton's conclusions. But what is more explicit is the expression, "the land," in verse 10. That phrase is used throughout this book to refer to the land of Israel. Though chapter 6 has already dealt with God's judgments on Rome, and though He will continue to speak of judgments on Rome in later chapters, a great deal of the book is God's judgment upon Israel.

And so the question arises, did Israel really deserve the severity of judgments that this book inflicted upon it? Was Israel really guilty of the blood of all the saints who died during this period? And the answer is, "Yes." The book of Acts shows Israel persecuting the church while Rome actually sought to defend Christians. And even when Rome began its persecutions in AD 62, this book shows the harlot, Israel, riding the beast and directing the beast in its persecutions of Christians. It was Babylon Israel who sits on the seven hills of Rome. It is Babylon Israel who becomes Rome's prophet. I won't develop this theme fully today, but I do want to at least introduce you to some of the ideas because they are key to understanding the book.

Jewish alignment with Rome had started much earlier in the empire. For example, I have a coin that shows Herod Chalcis and Herod Agrippa crowning the previous emperor, Claudius. That's astonishing, when you think about it - that two Jewish kings would have that kind of influence over previous emperors. So the influence was already there. But what begins to happen in AD 62 is more than that - much more.

In any case, a large number of events converged in that year to turn this into the Great Tribulation. Let me list six of them for you. Nero had fallen in love

⁵ David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Fort Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 194.

with the Jewish wife of another man. Her name was Poppeia. She actually seduced him in order to manipulate her way into his life. She talked Nero into divorcing and then killing Octavia, and Poppeia married Nero in AD 62.

This marriage was a turning point in Roman/Jewish relations, filling the court of Nero with Jewish advisors,⁶ and even entertainers like the Jewish actor, Alitirius had a huge influence upon Nero. Josephus mentions an example of how he got his way with Nero using Alitirius.

But before Jewish advisors were able to become this influential over Nero, he had to get rid of his mother and two advisors of his youth who had kept some of Nero's more evil tendencies in check. He had already murdered his mother. The two men who had such an influence upon him were the Stoic philosophers, Burrus, whom Nero poisoned in AD 62, and Seneca, who was allowed to retire to the countryside in the same year. Both of those men resisted Jews, and now that their opposition was removed, the Jewish portion of the imperial court had a free hand.

So in AD 62 we have the death of Burrus, the retirement of Seneca, the marriage to Poppaea, a flooding of influential Jewish people into his court, Nero granting Israel the right to the death penalty, and Rome coming into a seven-year pact with the Jews for the extermination of Christians.

Now, if you lived in AD 66 when John wrote this book, you would have been very familiar with this convergence of events four years earlier. It was public knowledge. But I've needed to take these twenty minutes to fill you in on this because at least some of you are not familiar with those details.

In any case, Josephus speaks highly of Poppaea's influence over Nero, as does the Talmud. In fact, the Talmud claims that Nero converted to Judaism and became the father of one of their most famous rabbis.⁷ While I am very skeptical of that claim, there is abundant evidence that Nero pretty much gave the Jewish authorities whatever they wanted. The Jewish Encyclopedia

6 Many authors have shown the large number of Jews in Nero's court. Harry Tajra says, "Although widely disliked by upper-class Romans, the Jews at Rome formed a politically powerful unit. The community was large and influential and its leadership had always maintained good relations with and direct access to the successive Caesars... [After giving some examples, he says] it is clear that the Jews wielded considerable influence at court." Harry W. Tajra, *The Martyrdom of St. Paul: Historical and Judicial Context, Traditions, and Legends*, volumes 3-146234 (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994), p. 83.

7 The Talmud says, "He [God] sent against them [Israel] Nero the Caesar. As Nero was coming he shot an arrow towards the east, and it fell in Jerusalem. He then shot one towards the west, and it again fell in Jerusalem. He shot toward all four points of the compass, and each time it fell in Jerusalem. He said to a certain boy, 'Repeat to me the last verse of Scripture that you have learned.' He said, 'I will wreak My vengeance on Edom through My people Israel.' Nero said, 'The Kadosh Barukh Hu [the Holy One] desires to lay waste His Temple and to lay the blame on me. So he ran away and converted to Judaism, and Rabbi Meir was descended from him.'" [Gittin 56a]

of 1906 says, "Jews... were well received at court, and Poppæa was always ready to second Jewish petitions before the emperor." It goes on to give several examples.⁸ The more recent Jewish Virtual Library gives several examples of the influence of Jewish advisors over Nero on Israel's legal disputes.⁹

In any case, the more you delve into the Jewish influence in Nero's court, the more you begin to understand why virtually all the early church fathers attributed Roman persecution to the Jews. That has mystified some Christians and it has caused others to think that the church fathers were anti-Semitic. They were not. They were appealing to well-known facts. They were appealing to the fact that Jewish bankers, philosophers, rabbis, and counselors had gotten Nero to approve their persecution of the church. They had convinced Nero that Christians were a dangerous cult. If you want to do some introductory reading, I recommend Ken Gentry's book, *Navigating the Book of Revelation*. He doesn't bring up all the stuff I have brought up here, but he does have a lot of other interesting information.

D. The imminence of the Great Tribulation (v. 11 - "about to be killed")

The last thing I want to point out is that this Great Tribulation was not at the end of history, but was imminent. We have already seen numerous indications of imminence in this book, but look at verse 11:

So a white robe was given to each of them, and they were told that they should

8 <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12274-poppaea-sabina> says, Jews... were well received at court, and Poppæa was always ready to second Jewish petitions before the emperor. In 64 Josephus went to Rome to obtain the liberation of some priests related to him who had been taken captive to that city for some minor offense. With the help of Alityros, Josephus succeeded in gaining the intercession of the empress, and returned home with his friends, bearing rich gifts with him. When King Agrippa added a tower to the ancient palace of the Hasmoneans, at Jerusalem, that he might overlook the city and the Temple and watch the ceremonial in the sanctuary, the priests cut off his view by a high wall. He then appealed to the procurator Festus, but a Jewish delegation sent to Rome succeeded through Poppæa's intercession in having the case decided in favor of the priests. The last procurator, Gessius Florus (64-66), owed his appointment to the empress, who was a friend of his wife Cleopatra.

9 It says, He [Nero] seems to have had no personal enmity against the Jews. Indeed, he supported Jewish vassal rulers and extended the borders of the kingdom of Agrippa II to include Tiberias and a number of other towns (Jos., Ant., 20:159; Jos., Wars, 2:252). He also bestowed Armenia Minor upon Aristobulus, son of the Jewish king of Chalcis (Ant., 20:158). In a dispute that broke out between the leaders of the high priesthood and the Jerusalem populace on the one side, and Agrippa and the procurator *Festus on the other, over the wall that had been erected to prevent Agrippa's palace from overlooking the Temple court, he decided in favor of the former (Ant., 20:195). His wife Poppaea Sabina, who had a certain sympathy for the Jews, had a hand in this decision. Nero's persecutions after the fire in Rome affected only the Christians but not the Jews...*

rest a while longer, until both their fellow slaves and their brothers, who were about to be killed just like they were, should complete the number.

From John's perspective, this was *not* a tribulation at the end of history. It had already started and there were more martyrdoms that were about to happen. The last martyrdoms of the Great Tribulation was imminent. And they are going to be described in the second half of chapter 7.

So with all of that as a background, I want to look at the persecution in verses 9-11 and ask the question: Was the cry of the martyrs answered by God? I believe the answer is a resounding "Yes," and that answer gives comfort and motivation to the persecuted church of any age to ask God for vengeance and to expect an answer. Let's look at the comfort of God's sovereignty first.

II. Persecution and God's sovereignty

A. Notice that Jesus opens the seal that permits persecution to happen (v. 9a)

The first words say, "And when *He* opened the fifth seal..." The "He" is a reference to Jesus. Jesus was the one who had been opening every one of these seals, which means that Jesus is the one who initiates each of these movements in history. *He* is the sovereign over all of history, and this verse makes it very explicit that He is the sovereign over the persecution of believers.

Why is that comforting? Well, it means that life is not out of control, and is not meaningless, and is not controlled by Satan, and is not controlled by the Illuminate. It means that the enemies of the church cannot do a single thing that does not serve Christ's purposes. By faith we can take comfort in that fact. It is a foundation for hope that our labors in the Lord are not in vain.

B. Notice that the martyrs call God Sovereign (v. 10b)

And the martyrs who were now in heaven recognized that. They call Him "O Sovereign" in verse 10. They do not question His control over their persecutors. They do not ascribe sovereignty to Satan. God is the Sovereign.

C. Notice that the martyrs know that God can change this at any time (v. 10c)

In fact, it is precisely because they are confident that God is sovereign that they cry out to Him. And they ask God to crush their persecutors with His

vengeance. We call this an imprecatory prayer. I'll deal with the importance of imprecatory prayers later, but here I will just mention that it shows the church's confidence in God's sovereignty in history. Psalm 2 shows Jesus not only ruling the nations in the New Covenant but also smashing rebellious ones with His rod of iron when they rebel. He is sovereign. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

D. Notice that there is a quota for martyrs in God's plan (v. 11d)

Of course, there is a timing for judgment and for rescue. Verse 11 says, "So a white robe was given to each of them, and they were told that they should rest a while longer, until both their fellow slaves and their brothers, who were about to be killed just like they were, should complete the number."

That last phrase speaks about a quota for martyrs in God's plan. In the first century, there was a quota, and the devil could not kill one more person than God had allowed for; not one person more. God is sovereign over persecution and He is sovereign over martyrdoms.

And the sovereignty of God is actually a comforting doctrine once you embrace it. Spurgeon said,

There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of divine sovereignty. On the other hand, there is no doctrine more hated by worldlings, no truth of which they have made such a football, as the great, stupendous, but yet most certain doctrine of the sovereignty of the infinite Jehovah.¹⁰

One of the surest ways to become bitter under persecution is to reject the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Such unbelief makes the pain meaningless and without eternal significance. If God is not in control, then none of it has meaning. But when you believe God is sovereign over even events like Joseph being sold into Egypt and being used to preserve His people alive, you know that He has a good purpose for you too. Just like Joseph you can say to your persecutors, "You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good."

¹⁰ Charles Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, volume 2, (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1856), p. 185.

III. Persecution and God's care (v. 9b)

A. Notice the honored place for the martyrs - under Christ's intercessory care (v. 9b)

And that's the next major point - that God loves you and cares for you in the midst of your sufferings. The reason He has allowed you to go through the furnace is not because He has forgotten about you. In fact, the book of Acts demonstrates that Jesus is pained when we are pained. He identifies with us, saying to Saul, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

And I want you to notice the honored place for these martyrs. In verse 9 John says, "I saw underneath the altar the souls of the people who had been slaughtered." He uses the term "slaughtered" (σφάζω) in connection with the altar to raise the image that just as priests slaughtered animals for sacrifice, these saints had been slaughtered by the Jewish system. Those animals were supposed to be expressions of faith in the coming Messiah, but because they rejected the Messiah of the altar they ended up slaughtering the people of the Messiah by their temple system. You either embrace the Messiah pictured in the altar or you end up opposing the Messiah and His people. There is no neutrality. But at the same time, the altar and slaughtering also represents Christ's sufferings on our behalf. So for them to be under the altar indicates that they share in His sufferings, but also that Jesus died on their behalf. This powerfully speaks of their identification with Jesus and their rejection by the temple.

B. Notice that these saints were slaughtered for faithfulness to God's Word and faithful witness to Jesus, and God notices (v. 9)

But notice too that the faithfulness of these martyrs was *noticed* by God. For all time God memorializes the fact that they were "slaughtered on account of the Word of God and on account of the testimony of the Lamb which they held." They held fast to those two things. And the fact that God notices shows that He cares.

Now, as a side note, I would say that if you don't love the Old Testament and if you don't bring it to bear in culture, you could theoretically escape from persecution. And that's what many Christians want - they want to escape from slander, being side-lined, or being discriminated against. They want to be liked. So they never bring God's law to bear in society.

You would be shocked at the number of evangelicals who refuse to preach

against homosexuality. Why? Because they know the backlash they will get. Do a search sometime on the legislation that the National Right to Life and its affiliates have opposed. I think you will be shocked. The National Right to Life is the worst opponent of Personhood bills and other bills designed to totally abolish abortion. And you might ask, "Why?" They usually give three pragmatic answers: 1) First, they say that it won't work. You can't abolish abortion, so we shouldn't try. They claim that our efforts should simply be to make abortions more rare, but that it will only hurt the cause to try to abolish abortion. 2) Second, they say that bills such as the Personhood bills in various states would make abortion come under laws punishing murder, and they don't want that because it is too controversial to call abortion murder. If a fetus is defined as a person, that that person in the womb has the same rights as all other persons, which immediately leads to the complication (in their minds) that we have to start calling it murder and punishing it as murder. They don't want to do that. Don't give a dime to the National Right to Life or other so-called Pro-Life lobby organizations that reject bills designed to abolish abortion. 3) Third, they say that such bills will hurt the chances of pro life congressmen and senators from getting re-elected.

In other words, these Christians aren't standing for God's Word and they aren't standing for the testimony of Jesus. They are standing on pragmatics and standing for the testimony of what works and trying to avoid persecution. That may be one way of avoiding the persecution of this passage, but it is not the way of winning the victor's robe in history or in eternity. These saints were "slaughtered on account of the Word of God and on account of the testimony of the Lamb which they held."

C. Notice that the martyrs trust God's loving care enough to cry to Him (v. 10)

But notice too that in these verses the martyrs trust God's loving care enough to cry to Him. They are Christ-centric, not centered on the state, or pragmatism, or the favor of man. Why cry to God if you think God is not for you? You cry to God precisely because He is a God who keeps our tears in His bottle (as David worded it). He knows every one of the tears and pains that we go through. And He does not leave His persecuted people alone. Indeed, His wrath is directed against the church's enemies when the church is faithful to Him. But His wrath is directed against the church when the church abandons faithfulness to Him because leaving the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus behind in our culture wars is spiritual adultery. I would rather have God's care and love and favor, even if it means

persecution from the world.

D. Notice the white robe of victory that is given to them (v. 11)

Notice too that He gave them white robes of *victory* in verse 11. The commentators generally say that those white robes represent victory in the righteousness of Jesus.

And notice that He didn't just single out certain ones to receive that honor. It says, "So a white robe was given *to each of them*." This reward from God's hand again illustrates the fact that God honors those who are martyrs. In fact, He honors them so much that many early church fathers were very disappointed when they were not killed. It was considered a great honor to die for Jesus.

E. Notice the rest that God gives to martyrs (v. 11)

And the last indication that God cares for those facing persecution and martyrdom is that God gives these martyrs a well-deserved Sabbath rest. The dictionary defines the word for "rest" as "to give relief from toil."

All of these are indicators that sovereignty and God's love go hand-in-hand in a believer's life. And if God loves us yet allows us to suffer persecution, then that persecution must have a good purpose.

IV. Persecution and victory

And that is the last point - that their labors were not in vain; that their faithfulness contributed to the victory of Christ's kingdom. And I've outlined five things that show this victory.

A. Notice that there is no question about whether God is sovereign, holy, or true to His Word (v. 10)

Notice that there is no question in these martyrs minds about whether God is sovereign, holy, or true to His Word. Instead, they ask God, "How long, O Sovereign, Holy and True, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the land?" If God is sovereign, He is *able* to deal with ungodly rebels. If He is holy, He is *motivated* to deal with ungodly rebels. In fact, He hates the evil even more than we do. His holiness motivates him to hate their persecution. And if He is true, He is *bound* by His promises to hear the prayers of His church for vengeance. That phrase is an incredibly comforting phrase for a person undergoing persecution.

Let me repeat what I said: If God is sovereign, He is *able* to deal with ungodly rebels. If He is holy, He is *motivated* to deal with ungodly rebels. And if He is true, He is *bound* by His promises to answer the prayers of His church for vengeance. This ought to be enough to convince us that, yes, God brings judgments in history in answer to the prayers of His people.

B. Notice the use of imprecatory prayer in connection with the altar of incense (v. 10)

And that brings us to the imprecatory prayer that they utter. "How long, O Sovereign, Holy and True, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the land?" These saints are crying out for God to begin the punishment of Israel that this book will go on to describe in brutal detail. And periodically throughout the book the saints in heaven rejoice over God's seven year war against Israel and God's judgments on Rome. They rejoice that God is a just Judge, a holy King, and a True Prophet.

Now, Evangelicals are often horrified by prayers like this. And let me assure you that the prayers for vengeance get punchier as the book goes on. You cannot say that imprecations are only a thing for the Old Testament, or only a thing in the Psalter. Jesus prayed imprecations, and the imprecatory Psalms are His own prayers. The apostles prayed imprecations. The church of Acts 4 prayed imprecations. And the book of Revelation is filled with imprecatory prayers. They are the nuclear weapons of the church, and if the church would once again take the War Psalms upon their lips, I think they would see a quick end to the spiritual-World-War-II that is going on right now. God is sovereign, so He is able to answer those prayers. He is holy, so He wants to answer those prayers. And He is true, so He is committed to answering those inspired prayers - *if the church will pray them*.

The sad thing is that even the persecuted church fails to do so. Why do God's enemies continue to prosper? Because the church's prayers are unbiblical. James says that you have not because you ask not. If you do not ask God to destroy His enemies, why should He? Of course, there are two ways that God can answer those prayers - He can do so by converting the person, in which case Christ bears the curse for them. But if that is the only kind of prayer that you offer, how can God give relief from those who are not elect and will not be saved? Without asking for judgment, our prayers cannot be fully answered.

But by calling upon *God* to handle vengeance, it frees us up to love our enemies and suffer persecution without bitterness. "Vengeance is Mine; I

will repay says the Lord." We are called to be soldiers who use the Bible as our weapon, love as our motive, and God's armor as our shield. And David did exactly that. When he by inspiration composed the imprecatory prayers, it left vengeance in God's hands and freed up David to love his enemies, except during those circumstances when he was a civil magistrate - the human expression of God's vengeance. Then he had to use the sword. But vengeance is a key component of the book of Revelation, and Evangelicals must once again come to grips with that doctrine.

C. Notice the white robe of victory that is given to them (v. 11)

And do victors sometimes die? Of course they do. God ordains that everybody dies. I love William Wallace's response to the Queen in the Braveheart movie when she tearfully worried that he would die if he didn't compromise. And his response was, "Every man dies. Not every man really lives." It is appointed unto man once to die - it is just that some have the great privilege of dying on the spiritual battle field as martyrs. Their lives count and their deaths count. You shouldn't fear death. I would rather die on the job for Jesus than shamefully die avoiding that job. But all will die. It's just that some deaths are a special honor and are memorialized by God.

I do want you to notice that their labors in the Lord were not in vain. They didn't *lose* to Nero or to the Jewish persecutors when they died. They received a white robe of victory in verse 11. That speaks of triumph. Christ's kingdom was advancing invincibly, so that Paul could say, "Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place." (2 Cor. 2:14) He always leads us in triumph. Paul was triumphant in life, Myers was triumphant in persecution, and He was triumphant in death.

D. Notice that they are only made to wait for "a little while" (v. 11)

And notice too that this trial was for a little while in verse 11. That gives perspective. Tribulation is not characteristic of all history, and certainly the Great Tribulation is not. When Amillennialists insist that there will always be Great Tribulation, they are ignoring large blocks of church history, and they are ignoring the last chapters of this book, which shows long periods of history with no tribulation. This kind of tribulation is characteristic of the times when Satan is losing the battle. Take a look at chapter 12:12.

Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants

of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.

He knew he was losing, and that was the reason for his greatest effort to destroy the church. But he couldn't do it. The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church and the numbers of Christians today compared to back then is staggering. That's why persecution is heating up in our time - because Satan is losing big time. More Muslims are coming to Christ on a weekly basis than have ever come to Christ. And the more that come to Christ, the more the Islamic demons fight back. Perhaps they know that they too have a short time in those countries. So they fight back while they have the power to do so. But it is actually a sign of the faithful church's victory.

The church in America has done the opposite. We have avoided the battle and are losing. We are not faithful to the Word of God in the controversies of our day. The church has become like the world on feminism, feel-goodism, statism, economics, counseling, and other issues. It's time for the church to repent and to become once again a church that holds fast to the whole Bible and to the testimony of Jesus Christ in culture. Coexistence is not the goal - transformation of culture by God's La Word and Christ's grace is the goal. And that kind of a goal will get you into trouble. But that kind of a goal will also get you victory.

E. The rest of this book is God's answer to their prayers

Now, the ultimate proof that their prayers were being answered is the rest of the book. After a little wait - perhaps weeks or months, the war against Jerusalem would start, and persecution against Christians by Jews would end. Within two years Rome would fall apart and receive its greatest judgment ever. And that would prove to be a redemptive judgment that would lead to millions of Gentiles becoming Christians.

These martyrs ask God to pour out His judgments upon the land, and God pours out the seventh seal, which ushers in the seven trumpets, then the seven plagues, and then the seven bowls of wrath are poured out. Yes, God answered their prayers for judgment because they were willing to ask God for judgment. The interpretation that says that they have to wait till the Second Coming for their prayers to be answered is ludicrous. It ignores the short while they are told to wait. Several thousand years is not a short wait. And that viewpoint ignores the fact that the chapters after this are God's answer.

He answers with an immediate sign with a sign in early AD 66 (vv. 12-17)

And interestingly, even though God makes them wait for two years for the persecution to stop, He almost immediately sent a sign of what He was going to do in early AD 66. And next week (Lord willing) we will look at that amazing event when the heavens seemed to open up like a scroll, the meteorite showers started to pour, the earth and every mountain shook so much that both Jews and Romans thought that the world was coming to an end. But it was simply a sign, and Josephus calls it a sign of calamities that were about to come upon Israel. But I think the sixth seal was an answer to the prayers of the saints in the fifth seal.

Just as a side note - I want you to notice that the saints in heaven aren't just playing on harps. They too are joining the armies of earth in both cheering us on and praying for our earthly victory. They are not satisfied with escaping planet earth. They are still interested in planet earth. They want Jesus to take over planet earth. And their continued prayers (that they are no doubt praying right now) will continue to be answered.

He answers with immediate protection of Jewish believers (7:1-8) while there are a multitude of Gentile believers who continue to die in the next two years (7:9-17)

But to give you a heads up of where else this book is headed as a result of the prayers of the saints, chapter 7:1-8 speaks of the rest of the Jewish Christians being spiritually sealed on the foreheads by angels so that they would not be hurt by the demons and so that they would be protected from the Great Wrath that was about to fall on Israel. When it is God's time to protect us, nothing can hurt us. Those 144,000 Jewish saints left Jerusalem just as Jesus commanded them to do in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. And they found security in the city of Pella, in the region of Perea. The flood of plagues, diseases, famines, war, and other disasters that fell upon the land of Israel completely bypassed those Jewish Christians.

And though chapter 7:9-17 speaks of the continued martyrdoms of Gentile Christians throughout the Roman Empire for two more years, they too were given the strength to die in victory. And Nero will be judged and Rome will fall part within two years.

He answers with the war against Israel in AD 66 (8:1ff)

But in chapters 8 and following there is the war against Jerusalem.

Conclusion

So did God answer the prayers of these martyrs? Yes He did. He did so in a spectacular way. And I think it ought to stir up the church of our own day to pray the kinds of prayers against humanism, statism, idolatry, and persecution that we see today. We should not just passively endure. We should petition the Sovereign who is *able* to destroy our enemies, the Holy One who is *motivated* to destroy our enemies, and the True One who is *committed* by His word to destroy our enemies - if we will ask. May we as a church join the saints of heaven in doing so. Amen.