

We're going back to the book of Revelation for a while. I'm not sure how long. We'll see how it goes. I think that the book of Revelation is an important book for us to study, but I feel that it will probably be more profitable for us if we take it in sections and take breaks every once and awhile. Today we will consider 6:9-11 which tell us what happened when the Lamb opened the fifth seal of the scroll of the plan of God for the coming of the kingdom of God.

We are introduced to this scroll in chapter 5. We learned there of this scroll, which contained the plan of God for the salvation of the world, which also includes the judgment of God on those who refuse to submit to his rule. Chapter 5 tells us that the only being in the universe who was worthy to take the scroll and open its seven seals was the Lamb who was slain. The Lamb, of course, is the exalted Jesus Christ. His death is at the heart of God's victory over sin and death and Satan. Because of that he is the one who is worthy to open the seals of the scroll. And we learn what that means from the rest of the book of Revelation which shows us that certain things happen either on earth or in heaven when each of the seals is opened. The rest of the book of Revelation makes it clear that the scroll is the plan of God for the salvation of his people and the defeat of evil.

That plan involves the history of the world leading to the final state which is the new heavens and the new earth. One of the powerful insights that we receive from Revelation's teaching about the scroll is that everything that happens in the world including the calamities of various kinds is all rooted in the death of Christ. The Lamb is worthy to open the seals of the scroll because he was slain. Everything that happens in the world belongs to the coming of God's kingdom. Both salvation and judgement are rooted in the death of Christ. The unrolling of the scroll is the implementation of God's plan for the renewal of all things and that includes everything that the rest of the book of Revelation describes.

So this morning we consider what happened when Jesus opened the fifth seal. John writes in verse 9, "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne." So we get a glimpse into heaven and we see the souls of those who had been killed because they faithfully witnessed to the word of God. Jesus himself had been killed because of his witness to the word of God and the NT makes it clear that many of his followers would also be killed for the same reason. Here in this text we are given a picture of what happens to those who are killed as martyrs. We see that their souls are in heaven. Their bodies are in their graves, but their souls are in heaven.

This is at the heart of the biblical comfort in the face of persecution. This passage and many others make it clear that Christians might be killed because of their witness to Christ. The great comfort here is that the souls of those who are killed because of their witness to Christ are in heaven.

Now this is a way of referring to the whole church and not only those who literally are executed because of their witness to Christ. This conclusion is based on the way that the book of Revelation and the rest of the NT speaks of believers and suffering for the faith. Chapters 2-3 of Revelation refer to all believers as those who overcome. Revelation 20:4 refers to all believers as "the souls of those who had been beheaded for the

testimony of Jesus.” Gregory Beale, one of the leading scholars on the book of Revelation writes, “This all-inclusive identification is clear from the use of “overcome” in chapters 2-3 and throughout the book not only of those who undergo execution for their faith, but primarily of believers who conquer temptations to sin and to compromise in the face of various kinds of suffering..... This is also consistent with the figurative use of sacrificial martyr language in the NT generally” (p. 390). This figurative use of “martyr language” is found in Jesus’ call to all believers to take up their cross and follow him and in Paul’s call to all believers in Romans 12:1 to present their bodies as living sacrifices to God.

Christian’s, by definition, are those who give their lives for Christ. As a body we are hated by the world. We are all called to be willing to be martyrs rather than deny Christ, but the vast majority of Christians are not martyred for their faith. So, in the world of the imagery of the book of Revelation, the reference to “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God” is a reference to the whole church – to all who are willing to suffer rather than compromise even if that suffering does not lead to a literal death.

This verse is intended to encourage all Christians to offer their lives to Christ regardless of that that looks like in specific instances. That may involve persecution of varying degrees of intensity. But it will always involve identifying with Jesus as the crucified one. It will always involve some degree of hatred from the world. The letter to the Hebrews makes it clear that while individuals are persecuted in varying degrees, all believers belong to the one body of Christ which is hated by the world. Hebrews 13:3 says, “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.” The idea here is that when one member of the body suffers, the whole body suffers. And Hebrews 13:12-13, “So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.”

So the picture of “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” is an encouragement for us to live the life of dying for Christ. Whatever form that takes, it is painful and sacrificial. It means that the Christian life is a radical offering of our lives for Christ. It means that the Christian life is not a life of ease and this worldly-comfort. The inner dynamic is the same whether it means the offering of our lives in martyrdom or the offering of our lives in other ways. Either way it involves dying to self that we might live for Christ. And either way the great encouragement to accept the pain of sacrifice in this life is the assurance that when our lives here on earth are over our souls will join those under the altar in heaven – “the souls of those who [have] been slain for the word of God and for the witness they [have] borne.”

Now these souls in heaven are crying out to God. They are in heaven. All is well with them. But that does not mean that there are no unmet desires. They are crying out to God with a loud voice. And this is what they are saying: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

Is this not surprising? These are the souls of the saints in heaven. They are perfected. They are completely free from their sins. Hebrews 12:23 refers to the saints in heaven as “the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” And they are calling for God to judge and avenge their blood.

Some of the commentators view this request as sub-Christian. But that is a profound misunderstanding. This is the prayer of those who have been perfected. This is the prayer of those who see things more clearly than they ever saw them on earth. This is the prayer of those who have been completely restored into the image of God.

This prayer for justice and vengeance sounds like the Psalms of imprecation in the OT. There are many places in the book of Psalms where the poets cry out to God to punish their enemies. For instance, Psalm 74:10-11, “How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand, you right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them?” The key to understanding verses like this in the Bible is that this is not about personal vengeance, but justice. Justice is an important theme in the Bible. God is a just God and so one of the ways that the people of God reflect the character of God is by a longing and praying for justice.

There is no hope that one day all will be made right apart from justice. The fact that God is a just God means that at the end of the world there will be a final judgment. If there would be no final judgment it would mean that evil would triumph over good. If there was no punishment of evildoers, it would mean that God would just be allowing all the horrible things that happen in the world and would never do anything about them. Just think of the how awful the world would be if there was no justice at all – if evil doers were never punished. One of the awful things about the world as it is, is that so often evil-doers get away with their cruelty in this life and one of the great comforts of the Bible is that in the end, when God judges the world, justice will be done.

That is why David sings in Psalm 9:7-8, “But the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness.” The NT makes it clear that Jesus is the one who will be doing the judging. When Paul was preaching in Athens he said that God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

Now if this were the whole story, there would be no hope for anyone because we are all guilty before God and deserving of eternal punishment. But that is the significance of Jesus’s death on the cross. On the cross Jesus suffered the punishment that we deserve so that we are spared that punishment. Furthermore the message that those who believe in Jesus are forgiven their sins and are made right with God has been sent into all the world by God himself. The justice of God is not the whole story. There is also the love and mercy of God which has made a way to be saved that satisfies his justice. But not all will believe in Jesus. Many will reject him. And they will end up getting what they deserve. And that is part of the good news.

The good news is that at the end of the world every sin will have received its punishment either by Jesus suffering it or by the rejectors of Jesus bearing their own sin. That is necessary for good to triumph over evil. That is necessary for God to triumph over Satan. That is necessary for the hope that in the end no sin will go unpunished. This is the way that God will deal with the terrible injustices that are perpetuated in this world. The scale of the injustices that some people perpetrate, and other people suffer is absolutely staggering and very disturbing. Injustices are disturbing because we are made in the image of God and so we have a sense of justice.

I read a book this week on the way that the Indian tribes were treated in America during the settlement of the west. It is a very disturbing story. The cruelty was mind-boggling. That kind of thing has happened countless times in the history of the world. Part of the reason that these stories are so unsettling is that they reflect our own sinful nature. They tell us something about ourselves. But the Bible tells us that after the final judgment is complete, perfect justice will be done. Some will be forgiven because Jesus suffered in their place. The rest will get what they deserve. And that is because of who God is. That is because God is a just God. This belongs to the reason that God is worthy of our worship.

And so it is part of the perfection of the saints in heaven that they cry out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” And this is included in the book of Revelation as a comfort and encouragement for the people of God who are still on earth and facing persecution and the hatred of the world. Just think of Christians who are facing the brunt of the persecution at this moment. It is easy for us to read or hear of some of the things that are happening around the world. I just read again of the prison camps in North Korea. The horrors those people are experiencing is unbelievable. The cruelty is shocking. The Bible assures us that the sins of the perpetrators will be punished – either in Christ if they repent and turn to Christ or they will get what they deserve for the great evils they have done to the followers of Jesus.

Now there is a tension here and that tension is rooted in the character of God. There is, of course, no tension in God, but there is a tension in us as we reflect the character of God and that is the tension between mercy and justice. God has sent the church into the world with the good news of salvation in Jesus. Reflecting God’s character means seeking the salvation of the lost – even our enemies – even haters of God and his people. Think of Jesus’ prayer even as the soldiers were nailing him to the cross. Luke 23:24 “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” We must reflect the love and compassion of Jesus. We must remember God’s compassion to us and reflect that compassion to others.

And yet one of the comforts that the Bible gives to those who are persecuted is that persecutors will one day receive what they deserve. In 2 Thessalonians 1 Paul is comforting the Thessalonians in their persecution and part of his comfort is that “God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you.” (2 Thessalonians 1:6). In Romans 12:19, Paul writes, “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.’” One of the reasons for not avenging ourselves is that God will make sure that justice is done in the end and we are to leave it in the hands of God.

So the prayer of the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God asking God to “judge and avenge our blood” is a holy prayer and it is intended to strengthen and encourage saints on earth who are suffering for the cause of Christ. It is not motivated by hatred, but by a longing for justice and behind it is a desire for the glory of God. If God would not punish the persecutors of his people who refuse to repent, he would not be a just God. The glory of God demands the final judgment. And so part of godliness is a longing and prayer for God to glorify himself both through the salvation of sinners and through the punishment of those who persist in their rebellion against God and who persecute the people of God.

Verse 11 tells us how this prayer for justice was answered. “Then they were each given a white robe 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.” To understand the significance of the white robes here it is important to consider the context in which this symbol is used. While in every case the symbol of white robes is used the meaning is similar, it is not identical and so it is important to consider what point is being made in the context.

Here the white robe is given as an answer to their prayer for justice. On earth they had been condemned to death as evildoers. In heaven they are crying out to God for justice. And in response God gives them white robes. We need to understand the significance of the white robes in this context. The white robes in this context do not symbolize justification in general as they do in other places. The white robes here have to do with the injustices that have been perpetrated upon them. They had been put to death as evil doers. By giving them white robes in response to their cries for justice, God is overturning the sentence of their persecutors. The word for this is vindication. God is declaring that they did not deserve to be killed by their enemies. God is declaring that killing them was an unjust act and that they righteous in the situation.

It is significant that in the Psalms where the psalmists cry out for justice, one of their specific requests is for vindication. Psalm 7 is an example of this. In verse 3 and 5 David says to God, “O Lord my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands ... let the enemy pursue my soul and overtake it.” And then in verse 8 he says, “The LORD judges the people; judge me, O God, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me.” When God’s people are persecuted, they are falsely accused. The people who do the persecuting claim to be on the side of what is right and accuse God’s people of being subversive and dangerous. That is why you have this prayer of David asking God to judge him according to his righteousness and integrity. Part of that judgment is declaring that the person who is suffering at the hands of his enemy is in the right.

That is what is going on in Revelation 6 when the souls who cry out for justice are given white robes. They have been put to death as evil doers. God is given them white robes declaring them to be righteous in the

situation. They have been falsely accused. God is vindicating them. Certainly, they are righteous in Christ, but the concern in this passage is with being vindicated by God in response to the way that they have been treated on earth.

One of the things to look forward to in heaven is this vindication. On earth Christians are often labeled as bigots or naïve or fanatics or a hindrance to the common good. The white robes here mean that the truth will be revealed. Christians are on the side of truth and righteousness and goodness. God will acknowledge that his people were in the right – that they have been treated unjustly by the world. This is the fulfillment of Psalm 135:14, “For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.”

So the souls of the saints who were crying out for justice were given white robes. They were also “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.”

So the souls of the saints in heaven are told that there will be more suffering on the part of the saints on earth before the number of those killed for their faith is complete. This message is not disturbing for the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God to hear. This message comes in the same breath as the message to rest a little longer. The image of rest is that of peace and comfort. It is the ultimate fulfillment of what Jesus promises to those who come to him. “Come to me and I will give you rest.”

So the saints in heaven are not upset about the news that the saints on earth must continue to suffer persecution. They hear that news with restful spirits. This news is not distressing for them. And the reason of course is that they are thinking of the suffering on earth from the perspective of heaven. They have experienced the joys on the other side of death. They understand in a way that is deeper than anyone on earth can understand that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” They understand fully what Jesus said in Matthew 5:11-12, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven”

This passage is here to help and encourage believers to persevere in the face of the spiritual warfare they are engaged in on earth. As we have seen there has always been great differences in the way Christians have experienced persecution. The book of Revelation was not only written for those who were facing death on account of their faith. It was written for all Christians in every situation and we are all called to give our lives for Christ amidst the attacks of Satan whether that is in the form of death threats or in the form of insults or in the form of the temptations of affluence and prosperity. Satan wants to kill us all – he goes about trying to do that in all kinds of different ways. And in the face of that opposition we are called to offer our lives as a sacrifice to God through the power of salvation in Christ. And one of the great motivations to carry on and to endure is the blessedness of heaven.

This passage gives us a peek into heaven, and we see that the souls of those who are there are at rest. They have received the blessedness of being with God and the rest that is promised to believers. This peek into heaven is given to us to encourage us in the struggles that characterize this present age. The saints in heaven are not sad and disturbed to be reminded that the saints on earth must suffer because they understand that suffering in the light of the joys they are experiencing in heaven. They understand what Paul meant in 2 Corinthians 4:17 when he wrote, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."

We are being called to consider our lives in the light of heaven. We are being called to live with joy and hope in the midst of the struggles of life because of the joys that await us after we leave this life. We are being called to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven rather than treasures on earth.