

Seals Five and Six: The Persecuted Church

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Scripture reading: Revelation 6:9–17

No one likes to be persecuted. Yet Scripture tells us that is part of the territory that we inherit if we are godly Christians, for all who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12).

How do you handle persecution? How should you handle persecution? How should you support Christians who are persecuted around the world today much more severely than you have ever faced?

And what about future persecution? As society becomes increasingly intolerant to Christianity even as it boasts of its tolerance, would you be prepared to go to jail for Christ's sake? We can find help in addressing these questions and many more from the second part of Revelation 6.

The message of the second cycle of visions of Revelation (chapters 4–7) is that behind this world and everything in it, there is a sovereign God who works not according to whim or caprice, but according to His purpose. He carries out that plan in every detail through the crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain.

In the first cycle of visions in the book of Revelation (chapters 1–3), the Lord gives John a vision of the church in the world and Christ's relationship to it. We see things on the surface, as it were. From chapter 4 onward, John is shown what is going on behind those scenes. He sees things from God's perspective. He sees a throne, a book,

and the One who alone is able to open the book and carry out the plan that is written inside it.

Revelation 6 and 7 detail the things that typically happen to us in this world before the Lord's return and what it means to be a Christian. The opening of the seven seals of the book reveals God's purposes for Christians in this world. These seven seals are not to be regarded as seven successive phases of history, but as the complete picture of what God has in store for Christians in this world.

The previous chapter addresses the opening of the first four of the seven seals, which launched the four horsemen of the apocalypse, bringing war, famine, and plague. The red horse, black horse, and pale horse come to our doors as well. We live under the same kind of pressures as the Christians of John's day. But the message of the first four seals is that if we are in Christ, we shall be victorious over these difficulties. All the terrible forces and influences that bear down on us like a stampede of horses will not conquer us, but will be conquered by us in the power of Christ.

The opening of the fifth and sixth seals also brings destruction. Wherever Christ comes in the power of His gospel, the sword is bound to follow. There is antagonism, opposition, hostility, and persecution.

Let us study the second cycle of visions in Revelation under the following headings: the outrage of persecution (Rev. 6:9); the outcry of the persecuted (v. 10); and the outcome of persecution (vv. 11–17).

The Outrage of Persecution

When the fifth seal is opened (v. 9), John sees the souls of believers who were slain (butchered) for the Word of God and their testimony. This seal describes something that

has happened throughout the ages to God's people, wherever they have been.

Genesis 3 records the first preaching of the gospel in the Garden of Eden by God Himself. He came looking for Adam, who was hiding because he had disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit. God asked, "Where art thou?" (v. 9). Then God preached the gospel to Adam and Eve, saying to the serpent, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (v. 15). That is the gospel. This promise foreshadowed what would happen on Calvary. Christ, as the seed of the woman, goes forth "conquering, and to conquer" (Rev. 6:2) the serpent.

But the sword is also involved. For God said, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed." Hostility, hatred, antagonism, persecution, and murder follow in the wake of this enmity. Genesis 4 tells us that Cain killed his brother Abel, and Abel's blood cried out to God for vengeance. Likewise, being a Christian in this world means confronting the sword of this world and its anti-Christian agenda.

Jesus says in Matthew 10:34–39: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth

his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.”

Jesus is saying that true Christians will suffer persecution. All Christians must take up their crosses. They must lose their lives for Christ’s sake. That may be literally true, as in physical martyrdom in some countries, but it is also true metaphorically and spiritually. To be a Christian in this world means to lose one’s life for Christ’s sake. It might happen in the context of an Islamic or North Korean prison, but it might also happen in a believer’s own home. Mother will rise against daughter; brother against brother. This is part of what it means to be a Christian. It means suffering for Christ’s sake.

Daniel certainly suffered for his faith. Though he knew he might be thrown to the lions if he didn’t stop praying to his God in Babylon, Daniel did not shrink from doing his duty. He trusted in God even in the lions’ den. And God preserved him. According to Daniel 6:23, “Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he believed in his God.”

The apostle Paul viewed persecution as a constant reminder of his weakness and utter dependence on God (2 Cor. 12:9–10). The heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 learned through persecution that their focus must be on the eternal rather than the temporal (vv. 1–3). They were to trust the Lord in the midst of suffering, and they were to desire a “better country” (v. 16).

Many Christians have been martyred for their faith throughout church history. Consider the believers who were tortured to death under Roman emperors. Remember the Reformers who were driven from place to place, whipped, and then burned alive or beheaded.

Today, more than fifty thousand churches in 115 countries hold a special service each year commemorating the worldwide persecution of Christians. We should not ignore the plight of persecuted Christians around the world.

Millions who profess the name of Christ around the world meet secretly for worship in their homes, because they are oppressed by hostile governments. If their allegiance to Christ is discovered, their homes are attacked and burned. The women and children are sold into slavery. Husbands and wives, parents and children, have their throats slit in front of each other for no other reason than refusing to deny the name of Christ. Hundreds of thousands are brutally tortured and brainwashed in an effort to force them to recant their faith. They spend years in solitary prison cells and hard labor camps. They fear daily for their lives.

Tens of thousands of believers are martyred each year for their faith. More Christians have been martyred for their faith in the past century than in the previous nineteen centuries combined.¹ Millions more face discrimination in their daily lives. Their access to education is restricted. They are forced to take the most menial jobs. They are excluded from the political and judicial processes of their societies. They are ridiculed and despised.

This is still relatively hard to imagine here in the United States. We do face increasing opposition for our Christian beliefs, but not the intense persecution that millions of others suffer for the faith. The law of our land still allows us the freedom to worship. It is hard to

¹. "Report: Christian Dies for Beliefs Every 5 Minutes" (<http://www.wnd.com/2011/06/311393#!>—accessed June 21, 2016).

imagine living in constant fear that your wife, husband, or neighbor might betray you. It is hard to imagine having no legal recourse, no hope for justice, and nowhere to hide. But that is precisely what millions of Christians face in other parts of the world.

When the fifth seal is opened, John sees the souls of these martyrs under the altar. This refers to the altar of burnt offerings, as described in Leviticus. When an animal was sacrificed on the altar of burnt offerings, the blood would be caught in a basin under the altar. In his vision, John doesn't see the blood of animals under the altar, but rather the souls of men, women, and children who have lost their lives for Christ's sake. He sees those who did not count their lives dear for Christ's sake.

In John's vision, these saints are not being slain, but have already passed through persecution and are now in heaven, waiting for their full glory. One purpose of this seal is to show that the martyrdom of the saints is controlled by Christ, for only when Christ opens the seal do the believers who were slain cry out for vengeance.

Being a Christian means laying down your life for Christ. It requires total commitment and consecration. It means you live your life as under the altar for Christ's sake. The Christian life is marked by consecration and sacrifice.

Paul describes this life in Romans 12: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (v. 1). He is saying: "Think of what Christ has done for you. He has poured out His soul unto death for you. Now the only reasonable thing you can do is to pour out your life as a thank offering to Him."

In 2 Corinthians 5:14–15, Paul explains what he means by reasonable service. He says, “The love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.” When he says, “The love of Christ constrains us,” he is not talking about some sentimental feeling, but rather the love of Christ as demonstrated on the cross. Paul is saying, as it were: “When I consider Calvary, I think that if He did that for me, I can no longer live for myself. My life is not my own, but I have to put it under His altar. I have to give it up to Him and live for Him. That is the reasonable thing to do.”

How much of your life is under the altar? How much have you sacrificed for your faith? Do you offer the Lord only leftovers or things you no longer want? A man was once given two calves. He said, “I will give one of them to the Lord.” One of the calves grew sick and died, so the farmer declared, “The Lord’s calf has died.” How easy it must have been, under the old covenant, to come to the Lord’s house with a diseased, weak, or dying animal from the flock. But that was sacrilege. God’s people were to bring Him the best of the flock and the firstfruits of their fields.

Likewise, we are to give God our best. If Christ died upon the cross, bearing God’s wrath for our sin, then it is sacrilege for us to hold anything back from Him. And the scandal is that people who are living not for themselves but for Christ—those whose lives are a fragrant offering to God—are the very people hounded, persecuted, and butchered by the world.

The Outcry of the Persecuted

In Revelation 6:10, we read, “And they cried out with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” To understand this verse, we must remember that it is part of a vision, not a literal picture of heaven. There is no literal altar in heaven, just as there is no literal throne. Also, there is no unhappiness, frustration, impatience, suffering, or thirst for revenge in heaven. No matter how we understand this outcry from beneath the altar, we are not to understand it as a thirst for revenge. It is clear from verse 11 that the glorified saints here are at rest and perfectly happy. The white robes they wear signify sinlessness, happiness, and acceptance with God.

So they do not cry out for revenge; rather, they pray for the vindication of God’s holy name as “Judge of the earth” (Ps. 94:2). This outcry of the martyrs is similar to the prayers in the imprecatory psalms, the “cursing psalms,” in the Old Testament.

The wrong that was done to these slaughtered saints cries out to be put right. It reminds us of Abel’s blood in the ground crying out to God (Gen. 4:10). We are not to understand that literally, because blood is not able to cry out. Neither are we to understand it in a sinister sort of way. The slain Abel did not become some kind of malignant force, seeking to take revenge on Cain. No, Abel is in heaven with the spirits of just men made perfect, and he is perfectly happy. He did not ask for revenge. But what happened to Abel did not go unnoticed. It was dealt with; it was put right.

The same outcome is in view in this outcry of the souls under the altar. These glorified saints are not thirsting for mere personal revenge. They are yearning for God’s

name to be vindicated and for His righteousness to be upheld.

Do you yearn for the vindication of God's holy name? Can you say with the psalmist in Psalm 119:127–128: "Therefore I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold. Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way"? Stephen, the first Christian martyr, died praying, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60). There was no personal vindictiveness or thirst for revenge in those words. Yet what happened to Stephen and millions like him cannot go unpunished. If God is God, these crimes must be punished.

So we cry out: "LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph? How long shall they utter and speak hard things? and all the workers of iniquity boast themselves?" (Ps. 94:3–4).

Christians are persecuted for various reasons. One is because we say there is only one way to salvation, and that is through Jesus Christ, God's Son. This exclusive claim does not fit the New Age movement. Neither does it accommodate radical Islam.

Christians are also persecuted because Satan wants to destroy the people of God. Peter thus advises believers, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Satan aims to swallow or destroy all believers.

Christians are persecuted so that they might be strengthened in faith. James 1:3–4 says: "The trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." God tests the faith of His people to develop spiritual endurance in their walk with Him.

Persecution is also the pathway to God's gracious reward. Paul says to Timothy near the end of his life, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7–8).

But most of all, persecution is the way to God's kingdom of glory. The day of judgment, which follows a time of intense persecution, will make clear to the church and the entire world that Christ is holy and true, and that He represents God in His perfect justice.

The saints under the altar do not cry in vain. Everything is done to comfort them and to reassure them that the day on which God will judge the world in righteousness is not far off.

First, "white robes were given unto every one of them" (Rev. 6:11a). Christians who suffer persecution will one day be adorned in white robes as they praise the triune God. White is a symbol of eternal justification by Christ's blood and acquittal by the Father. It is also a symbol of sanctification, for in heaven the saints are perfectly holy before God in Christ. And it is a symbol of their victory. Just as the rider on the white horse symbolizes Christ's victory, so the white robes given to souls under the altar symbolize that they are more than conquerors in the battle of faith. In short, white is the symbol of their perfected, glorified nature (Heb. 12:23).

Second, "it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled" (Rev. 6:11b). This promise is meant to reassure these souls that they have not cried out in vain. They must rest until the gathering in of all the elect, and

especially the offering up of all the martyrs of God, has been accomplished. God knows all who are His, and He knows the exact number of people who will die for the faith. His timetable is also absolutely perfect. He is never one step out of sync with His glorious purposes to gather, preserve, defend and glorify His Son's church.

But we are inclined to ask: "When is Christ coming? Why does He tarry?" Peter tells us we are mistaken if we think that Christ is tarrying or delaying; rather, He is ever at work, gathering and building His church: "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise...but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." He urges us therefore to "account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation," that is, salvation for all those who are ordained to eternal life through Christ (2 Peter 3:9, 15).

We have a significant responsibility to alleviate the suffering of Christians who are being persecuted for their faith. God will keep them, but we must do what lies in our power to do here on earth. Here are some ways to help persecuted Christians today:

First, *be informed*. Write to religious liberty advocacy groups, requesting updated information on worldwide persecution.

Second, *empathize with those who are suffering for Christ*. As 1 Corinthians 12:26 says, "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it."

Third, *pray for them*. When Peter was imprisoned, the church gathered to pray without ceasing for his release (Acts 12:5). We, too, must pray for those who are languishing in horrible conditions. We should pray also for Christians in specific countries.

For example, Afghanistan has 48,000 mosques and not one church building. It has seventy unreached people groups who have never heard the gospel. Of the fifty languages spoken, the New Testament has been translated into only two, while none of the fifty has a complete Bible.

Likewise, Sudanese Christians are often forced to flee *jihad* or holy war into the snake-infested bush. Thousands struggle to survive by eating leaves off trees. Thousands more are killed by government-backed militias.

Fourth, *support them*. Speak of their faithfulness in the church. As 2 Thessalonians 1:4 says, “So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure.” Speak of their plight to your friends. Write letters to the media. Write to your leaders in Congress and urge them to act on behalf of persecuted Christians around the world. Tell them a double crime is being committed: the crime of persecution by Communist and Islamic governments against Christians, and the crime of free nations like ours that ignore such wrongdoing out of self-interest or political cowardice.

Fifth, *go to them*. If we can’t visit suffering Christians, we can find ways to contact them. Follow the example of Peter, who wrote to brethren scattered far and wide in his day (1 Peter 1:1). At the very least, contribute to mission groups that work among persecuted people.

When the lives of her people were in jeopardy, Esther was tempted to avoid the plight of her fellow Jews until Mordecai, her guardian, said to her: “Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king’s house, more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and

deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esth. 4:13–14).

Today, we are citizens of the most powerful nation in the world. Like Esther, we feel safe in the United States, secure in the possession of freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. But like Esther, we must speak out against the extermination of our brethren in other countries, even if it costs us something to do that. If we don't speak out, no one is safe. We may be next in line for intense persecution.

We must heed the words of Hebrews 13:3: "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body."

The Outcome of Persecution

If evil triumphs, the world gets worse, and the wicked prosper, what is the point of being a Christian? The opening of the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12–17) answers that question. It tells us that the day of judgment is coming, when God in His almighty power will right every wrong with the world. He will shake the world and everyone in it. He will move mountains and islands, darken the sun, turn the moon into blood, and cause the stars to fall from heaven.

It will be a terrifying day for those who are not right with God.

The symbols of this passage, including falling stars, the cries of the wicked, the quaking earth, and the rolling up of the sky as a scroll are all descriptive of the tremendous and terrifying upheaval that is coming on that day that God has appointed to judge the world. The

opening of the sixth seal tells us about the complete overthrow of all earthly powers, rulers, movements, and systems. Every power and authority in earth and in hell will be confounded. No words could more powerfully express the total hopelessness, ruin, and despair of all earthly powers and interest.

The key figure in all of this is the Lamb. Verses 15–17 describe a dislocated universe and a terrified human race. People of all classes—kings of the earth, great and rich men, mighty men, and bondmen and free men—hide themselves in the dens and caves of the mountains and cry out, “Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?”

These hardened men have been slaughtering Christians without a pang of guilt, yet now they cannot look into the face of the Lamb. They call upon the rocks to fall upon them and cover them. They call to the mountains to collapse upon them. They would rather perish in a nuclear holocaust than look into the face of Jesus Christ.

The wrath of the Lamb is indeed terrifying to those who have rejected Him and scorned His love. There is nothing more frightening than the face of perfect love turned against you. That is what the day of judgment is all about. When God judges the world, He will judge through the Man He has appointed, His Son, Jesus Christ. The very Jesus who went to the cross to die for sinners will be in charge on the day of judgment.

Unbelievers will plead to be delivered from the wrath of the Lamb. How horrible it will be to be damned by Him who came to save sinners! This reminds us of Psalm 130, which asks, “If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O

Lord, who shall stand?” (v. 3). But the psalm also offers this comfort: “But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared” (v. 4).

For many, it will be too late to repent. Before, they felt no need to repent of sin and cling to a Savior to deliver them from the wrath to come, because they thought they could get through it on their own. Now they are calling for the mountains to fall upon them. Is the Lord pleading with you even now to come to the Lamb who died to save sinners? If He is, it is comforting to know He is still speaking to you. The next time you hear His voice, it may be too late. Then you will have to bear the wrath of the Lamb.

Ultimately, the only thing that matters is that we are on the right side of Jesus. The only thing that matters is that you and I are able to look Him in the face on the day of judgment, clothed in His white robes of righteousness. Ultimately, it does not matter what kind of a nest we have made for ourselves in the short time we are here on earth. The only thing that matters is how we are related to Him. Philip Doddridge puts it like this:

Ye sinners seek His grace
Whose wrath ye cannot bear;
Fly to the shelter of His cross
And find salvation there.²Christ
is the Lamb of God who takes
away the sin of the world. God
has sent forth Jesus in this day
of grace to be the covering, the
propitiation for sin, to hide you
from His anger and righteous
judgment. Let me urge you, by
the grace of the Holy Spirit, to

² . Phillip Doddridge, “And Will the Judge Descend” (1755).

flee to Jesus as the only Savior.
Hide yourself in Him today.

