

Rev 6:9-11—HOW LONG, O LORD?

INTRO: “How long, O Lord?” How long will you allow death and injustice and oppression and rape and bloodshed and all other sorts of evil to continue? And *why*? If you’re all powerful you could stop the evil in a second. And if you’re all good, you would—wouldn’t you?

And especially the evil and death and oppression that overcomes your own people—those who love you and believe in you and stake their lives on you—only to be mugged and beaten and killed and have all kinds of bad things happen to them. For example, in October Islamic Jihadists *supported by the US government* took over the town of Sadat, Syria, robbed every home, tortured and murdered 45 Christians, and burned 14 churches. And no one even reported it in the West. Is that the way you treat your friends, God?

These are the questions that try men’s souls. We all know it.

Today’s passage of Scripture—**Rev 6:9-11**—explicitly raises the question, “How long, O Lord?”

BACKGROUND: Before we read this passage and talk about what it is telling us, we need some background on the book of Revelation in general and this passage in particular. The book of Revelation was written to the churches in the latter part of the 1st century, but it sets forth principles that apply to all churches and believers from then until Christ returns. Also, the book is set forth in a series of visions, most of which are overlapping and span the entire time from Christ’s ascension to His Second Coming.

One of those visions is the vision of the opening of the seven “seals” in ch. 6. [Please turn to Rev 6]. This vision ends with the Second Coming, because **vv.12-17** talk about the stars falling, the sky being split apart, the mountains and islands being moved out of place, and the great day of God’s wrath coming. That is the end of history when Christ comes again.

We know that **vv.1-11** are talking about events that occur throughout the time between Christ’s ascension and his Second Coming for at least two reasons:

- First, the events listed in **Rev 6** parallel the “signs” Jesus gave in the Olivet Discourse (**Matt 24**). And the “signs” in **Matt 24** characterize the entire period between Christ’s first advent and the second coming.
- Second, that is confirmed by the fact that **Rev 6** is intimately connected with **Rev 5**. In **Rev 5** God and the beings in heaven proclaim that the Lamb (Christ) alone is worthy to “*open the book*” and “*break the seals*,” based on what he did *on the cross*. Consequently, we see Christ breaking the seals in **Rev. 6:1–9**. Those seals describe destructive forces that were unleashed as a result of Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection and ascension. They began then and will continue until his return in glory.

BTW, if you want to learn more about the book of Revelation and the study of the last things in general, the single best source is a book entitled *Biblical Eschatology* by some guy named Jonathan Menn. It’s on Amazon where you can preview many of the pages. There’s a Kindle edition as well. (End of commercial)

So we know that what **Rev 6** is describing events that have taken place for the last 2000 years and will continue to take place until Christ comes again. And we know one other thing, which we see it in **vv.1, 3, 5, 7, and 9**. And that is that, ultimately, it is Christ who is running the show. He is in charge. He has ultimate authority—because *He* is the one who breaks the seals that set in motion the events being described.

This does not relieve people of their responsibility, or their accountability to God, for what they do. God works through human action to effectuate his plan. We see that there *is* a plan in **v.11** where God talks about the completion of the plan, and in **vv.12-17** which describes the end. IOW, nothing that happens—however horrendous some things may seem to us—occurs by accident. As the old song says, “He’s got the whole world in His hands.” We may not see it, or understand why, but He does.

Which brings us specifically to our passage [**READ Rev 6:9-11**]. What is this telling us? In this passage God is assuring the martyrs who are crying out—just as He is assuring us that:

PROP: “I know, I care, and I *will* judge those who do the evil and will avenge and reward those who are Mine.” IOW, “I have a plan, and this is all part of it.”

But we will only understand this when we see that this passage is confronting us to consider three questions:

O/S: (1) What is most important to us? (2) Why does God delay to right the wrongs? and (3) What is most important to God?

I. What is most important to us?

When I say “us” I am talking about people who call themselves Christians—although this passage will speak to those of you who are not Christians as well, because our passage and the book of Revelation as a whole clearly and sharply contrast the essence of what it means to be a Christian versus everyone else.

A. v.9 talks about **“the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and because of the testimony which they had maintained.”** George Eldon Ladd states: “One of the repeated emphases of the entire New Testament is that it is the very nature of the church to be martyr people. When Jesus taught that a man to be his disciple must deny himself and take up his cross, he was not speaking of self-denial or the bearing of heavy burdens; he was speaking of the willingness to suffer martyrdom. The cross is nothing less than an instrument of death. Every disciple of Jesus is in essence a martyr; and [in our passage] John has in view all believers who have suffered.”

We see that in the context of the book of Revelation as a whole. In **Rev 6:11** God tells the martyrs to “rest.” The only other place in Revelation where deceased believers are exhorted to “rest” is in **Rev 14:12-13** which is addressed to all saints in general who persevere by **“keeping the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus”** and **“die in the Lord,”** even if they were not physically martyred. Therefore, Christian martyrdom primarily is a mindset. It takes seriously Jesus’ words that **“a servant is not greater than his Master; if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”** This *may* result in physical martyrdom, but the whole of Christian life is to be characterized by a dying to self and living for Christ and others, regardless of the consequences—because we are not our own but are Christ’s.

B. This whole mindset of the Christian who is faithful to the point of death—IOW a martyr in principle—contrasts with everyone else, who are said to “dwell upon the earth.” In **Rev 6:10** the souls of those who had been slain for the Lord cry out **“How long, O Lord will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth.”** That phrase, *“those who dwell on the earth,”* or variants of it, repeatedly occurs throughout the book of Revelation. It consistently has a negative meaning. It indicates that, at their essence, unbelievers approach life from a worldly perspective and mindset; they are *of* the world in addition to being *in* the world. As such, they follow the ways of the world and fall under God’s condemnation.

By contrast, in the book of Revelation the church always belongs to heaven regardless of where its members may reside physically. Throughout Revelation, every human being is seen as being a member of one of two, mutually opposing, camps, either:

- the world, or the church;
- those who dwell on the earth, or those who are citizens of heaven;
- those who worship the beast, or those who worship the Lamb;
- those who bear the mark of the beast, or are those who are sealed by God;
- those whose names have not been written in the book of life, or those whose names have been written in the book of life;
- those who are part of the “great city,” or those who are part of the “beloved city.”

There is no “neutral” or third alternative. Therefore, Christians are to approach life from a heavenly perspective and mindset. Although we are *in* the world we should not be *of* it. The entire book of Revelation provides the heavenly perspective of the true significance of what is occurring on earth so that we can be conformed to the image of Christ.

Today’s passage is confronting us with the question: Who are we? What is most important to us? Which camp are we a member of? **Phil 3:20** tells us that **“our citizenship is in heaven.”** Do we really believe that or are we really “earth-dwellers,” **“those who dwell on the earth”**? How we live; what our priorities are; what we do with our time; what we do with our money; how we treat people, all show where our real citizenship lies. Great, everlasting stakes are at issue. God is not fooled by our lip-service. Are we really martyrs at heart? We may not be in a position to die for people, but do we *live* for them?

Which leads us to assess the second question:

II. Why does God delay to right the wrongs?

A. The prayer of the martyrs in Rev 6 is unique in Revelation because, as John Heil points out: “In a book imbued with references to worship, the opening of the fifth seal in [**Rev 6:9–11**] contains the only example of a prayer of supplication and its answer.” God’s *immediate* answer to the martyrs in **Rev 6:11** tells them to wait, and warns that their “fellow servants” and brothers can expect to be killed for the word of God and testimony of Jesus Christ.

At the same time, the giving of the white robes serves to assure the souls that they *will* be avenged and rewarded, since white conveys the ideas of righteousness, holiness, and vindication. Greg Beale explains that “throughout the book of Revelation ‘white’ has represented a reward for purity or purity itself, resulting from persevering faith tested by persecution.”

Turn to **Rev 19**. **Rev 19:7–8** is talking about the “marriage supper of the Lamb” with his bride, the church. **Rev 19:8** says [READ]. Beale indicates that the “white” garments given here not only represent righteousness but also are a reward of *vindication* for those who have persevered through persecution. I think that appears in the context of **Rev 19** itself. In **Rev 18** Babylon had been judged. In **Rev 19:2**, when the multitude in heaven are rejoicing over the judgment of Babylon, they specifically rejoice over the fact that God “**has avenged the blood of His bond-servants on her.**” That is a direct answer to the martyrs’ prayer in **Rev 6:10** in which they asked “**How long, O Lord . . . will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?**” The Greek word for “avenge” appears in Revelation only in **6:10** and **19:2**, thus connecting the two passages. IOW, God knows. He cares. He has a plan. He *will* hold those who do evil accountable for their evil and will judge them, and he *will* avenge the blood of his saints and vindicate them.

B. But His timing is not our timing. So why does he wait? Why does he allow such evil—so much evil and for so long? These, of course, are among the profoundest questions there are, and we could spend hours talking about them. But in brief, the Bible suggests, among other things, the following two related answers:

(1) He delays in order to give people *time* to repent and turn to Christ. I became a Christian in September 1982 after having lived a rather sinful life for several years. Had Christ come back in 1981 my eternal destiny would be completely different. If you are *not* a Christian, Christ is giving you *time now* to come to him. It is a matter of his *grace* that he did *not* strike me down when I sinned and has not struck you down even though you defy him.

(2) He delays in order to give people *reason* to repent and turn to Christ. The Bible says that God gives people the ability to make wealth and causes the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike. IOW, when things are good, we should turn to God in thankfulness, acknowledging that he is the very source of our life and our abilities and ultimately of the good that comes to us. Do we do that?

On the other hand, when things are bad—when we are confronted with catastrophe and with our own mortality—do we acknowledge that we are *not* self-sufficient? Do we acknowledge that there is only One being who can give us real meaning and stability when all is crashing down, and who can wipe away all our tears and give us eternal life?

Either way—good times or bad—*should* lead us to God. But many people do not go to him. They take sole credit for the good and blame God for the bad rather than thanking him for the good and accepting their own responsibility for, or seeing God’s presence even in, the bad.

God has revealed who he is in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus suffered and died just like us. Indeed, Jesus suffered and died unjustly. So he knows first-hand all the evil we are going through because he experienced it himself, personally. He alone has the power to right every wrong—and *he will do so*. Why then don’t we turn to him?

Which leads us to the final question we need to consider:

III. What is most important to God?

A. God’s timing is not our timing because his thoughts and his ways, his perspective, and his values are not ours. It’s sort of like this: Nancy and I have a wonderful 18-month old granddaughter named Calice. Calice is an intelligent girl, but her likes and dislikes, what she wants, and when she cries about something are limited to the understanding and perspective of an 18-month old. Her parents and grandparents, of course, have a virtually *infinitely* greater knowledge and understanding than Calice has because we are grown-ups, we are fully self-aware, and we have vastly greater experience through all stages of life that Calice simply is *incapable* of having at this stage of her life.

Similarly, when *we* look at all the evil in the world, *we* are prone to only focus on this life, this world, because that is all *we* know. But our frame of reference, like Calice’s, is too small. We are incapable of grasping the grand cosmic significance of what is really going on. But God is different. He knows infinitely more than we are even capable of understanding. He knows the future. He knows how everything fits together and will fit together. And he knows what it will take to bring about the greatest good for the universe.

B. There is another aspect to what God is doing, and this is very important. The Bible says that “**man looks at the outside, but God looks at the inside.**” Everything God does in working through the acts of people—both good and bad—is having the effect of refining people’s character. God uses the crucible of suffering to refine those who are His and make them more like Jesus himself. On the other hand, the evil that those who are not Christ’s do and the suffering they cause are hardening them in their rebellion against God.

In God’s plan, the witness of Christian martyrdom is a necessary and important part of this process. We

need to realize something: the Bible tells us that faithful Christians will be given the authority of participating in the judgment. Our faithfulness in the face of death, disaster, persecution, and evil is preparing us now for the role of faithful judges; it also provides evidence for God's condemning and judging the unbelieving world so that, at the final judgment all will see—believers and unbelievers alike—that the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. Nothing that happens, no matter how horrendous, is wasted.

One example is this: In the month before the massacre in Sadat, Syria, another ancient Christian region, Ma'loula, Syria—known as “the land of martyrs”—was besieged by Islamic Jihadists. Its churches were bombarded and plundered, its inhabitants were forced to convert to Islam or die. The last words of one man who did not give in were these: **“I am a Christian, and if you want to kill me for this, I do not object to it.”** His last words demonstrate how deeply his character had been **“conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.”** That event, that martyrdom, and those words, will not be wasted. We will hear them again at the judgment.

God does care about what happens to us here and now, but that is not his primary concern. The reason is because God knows that, however long we may live on this earth, it is not even a drop in the bucket compared to the eternal life we will be living when we leave this life. So God's primary concern is not this *temporary* life and *temporary* earth but our *eternal* life and the new, *everlasting* earth that will come into being. He is mainly interested in changing us from the inside-out, making us like Jesus who was and is perfect in every respect. He is acting now to prepare us for an eternity of joy and fulfillment beyond our imagination.

The last aspect of what matters most to God is this:

C. In seven places in the book of Revelation Christ gives promises to the one who “overcomes.” But throughout the book, Revelation indicates a paradoxical notion of what it means to “overcome.” The biblical notion of “overcoming” is modeled on Christ's own overcoming of Satan and death. For example, in **Rev 5** Christ is portrayed both as a Lion and a Lamb. He is seen as a Lion because he overcame Satan and death. But he only triumphed over death and Satan because he was slaughtered as a Lamb.

God wants us to be like Jesus Christ in heart and mind and character. And the only way that will happen is if the church follows in her Master's footsteps. What Revelation tells us is that the church is even now conquering by maintaining her faithful witness in the face of trials; in overcoming the powers of evil; in subduing sin in her members' lives; and in beginning to rule over death and Satan by identification with Jesus. The church's endurance, like Christ's own enduring the cross, is part of the process of conquering. IOW, perseverance in faith despite persecution *is* victory for the church.

Which takes us back to our passage in Rev 6. The martyrs are crying out. And again, this is going on *now*. But because “now” is *before* Christ comes again, *before* the final judgment, even though they are in heaven the martyrs in **Rev 6** still do not seem to fully grasp the paradoxical meaning of their martyrdom. But we do. As Richard Bauckham puts it:

When the beast puts the martyrs to death, who is the real victor? The answer, in Revelation, depends on whether one sees the matter from an earthly or a heavenly perspective. From the earthly perspective it is obvious that the beast has defeated the martyrs. . . . The apocalyptic visions, however, reveal that from a *heavenly* perspective things look quite different. From this perspective the martyrs are the real victors. To be faithful in bearing the witness of Jesus even to the point of death is not to become a helpless victim of the beast, but to take the field against him and win. . . . The martyrs conquer not by their suffering and death as such, but by their faithful *witness* to the point of death. Their witness to the truth prevails over the lies and deceit of the devil and the beast. For those who reject this witness, it becomes legal testimony *against* them, securing their condemnation.

CONCL: So, what is our perspective on adversity, on our suffering? This passage in Revelation should help us see God's perspective on our lives and thereby give us the perspective we need to help us persevere in the face of evil and suffering. Today's passage should help us at least get a glimpse that evil and suffering are, in God's mysterious providence, part of a greater plan. God knows. God cares. He is actively working his plan to transform us into the image of Christ, and that will lead to our vindication and the greatest good for the entire universe for all eternity.

When we start seeing this, and seeing the events of our lives as the process of making us more like Jesus and preparing us for our eternal existence, it puts all of our troubles, problems, and even death itself into perspective. When we react to adversity in faithfulness to Christ, God takes our suffering and apparent defeats and turns them into victory.