

How Long, O Lord?

Revelation 6:9-11

Introduction

My friend Shana Reif suffered from Cystic Fibrosis, a genetic disease that primarily affects the lungs and other organs. It causes thick, sticky mucus to build up in the airways, leading to repeated infections, inflammation, and progressive lung damage. In many cases, the disease can advance until the lungs can no longer do what God created them to do—bring oxygen into the body and sustain life.

Cystic Fibrosis is a horrible and incurable disease, and it was the disease Shana endured all her life. When she was born, her parents were told she would not live much past her twentieth birthday. But Shana lived to be thirty-two.

I came to know Shana in high school, not long after I became a follower of Jesus. After high school, we became very close friends. She edited my Bible college papers, and I visited her often during her many hospital stays. I also visited her at home as she recovered from the latest infection. By 2003, her lungs had been so damaged by chronic infections that she was placed on the waiting list for new lungs. She received a double lung transplant in 2004, but even then, her suffering did not fully end. Her body remained fragile. Her fight continued.

But Shana loved Jesus. Though she struggled deeply with her disease, she held onto the hope of the gospel. One of the last emails I received from her was signed with words from her favorite hymn: “Great is Thy faithfulness.” In 2007, Shana died from complications after a procedure to reopen a constricted airway.

When someone you love suffers like that, the question “How long?” is not theoretical. How long will disease ravage bodies? How long will death take those we love? How long will God’s people suffer in a world still broken by sin? How long before Christ makes all things new?

Revelation 6:9–11 brings us to that question. But here, the cry comes specifically from those who have been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they maintained.

The Martyrs: The Cost of Their Witness (v. 9)

There are three cycles of judgment in Revelation: the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls. These cycles do not unfold in strict linear succession—seals, then trumpets, then bowls—but recapitulate the same period of history with increasing intensity, like birth pains. For our

purposes, I simply want you to notice one pattern that helps us understand what is happening in this passage.

In each cycle—the seals, trumpets, and bowls—the first four judgments affect the world in broad, visible ways, but the fifth shifts the focus. The fifth seal shows the saints crying out for justice (Rev. 6:9–11). The fifth trumpet shows judgment beginning to fall on the enemies of God—those who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads (Rev. 9:1–12; especially 9:4). The fifth bowl shows judgment reaching the very throne of the beast, whose kingdom wages war against all who refuse to worship him (Rev. 16:10–11; cf. Rev. 13:7–8, 15). This is why the first four seals show us the horsemen riding across the earth. But when the fifth seal is opened, the focus shifts from what is happening on earth to what heaven sees when God’s people suffer because of the word of God and the testimony they maintain.

These martyrs are not beneath the altar because they were victims of history. They are there because they belonged to the Lamb and remained faithful to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. Their witness cost them their lives. John is showing us what Jesus had already told His disciples: “**If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me**” (Matt. 16:24; NASB). The fifth seal reminds us that following Jesus is not merely a call to believe certain truths about Him; it is a call to bear faithful witness to those truths, even when obedience is costly.

Polycarp is said to have been a disciple of the apostle John and later became the bishop of Smyrna. Smyrna, you may remember, was one of the seven churches Jesus addressed in Revelation. Jesus told that suffering church, “**Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life**” (Rev. 2:10). Years later, Polycarp was arrested and ordered to deny Christ. When pressed to renounce Jesus, he replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?” Polycarp’s witness cost him his life, but heaven did not see his death as Rome did. Rome saw a criminal to be silenced. Heaven saw a faithful witness beneath the altar.

And we do not have to go back to Polycarp to see this kind of witness. You may remember the twenty-one Coptic Christians who were taken by ISIS in Libya and led onto a beach in orange jumpsuits. They were ordinary men who refused to renounce their faith in Jesus. Their blood was shed on earth, but Revelation 6 reminds us that heaven did not miss a drop. The world saw men being led to execution. Heaven saw faithful witnesses beneath the altar.

Since 2015, conservative estimates suggest that more than 50,000 Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons around the world. According to Open Doors’ 2026 World Watch List, North Korea remains the most dangerous country in the world to be a Christian, while Nigeria is the deadliest, accounting for 3,490 of the 4,849 Christians killed for their faith during the latest reporting period.

The seals describe the birth pains that mark this present age. The first four seals show us a world marked by conquest, war, famine, and death. But when the fifth seal is opened, we are shown what heaven sees when God's people suffer because of the word of God and the testimony they maintain.

The Altar: The Cry Before God (v. 10)

Notice that John not only tells us that these faithful Christ-followers suffered and died for their faith, but also tells us where he saw these Christians. They are "under the altar." This is a crucial detail that you can only understand if you know something about the Old Testament tabernacle that God told Moses to build. Scripture tells us that the earthly tabernacle was a copy and shadow of the one in heaven (Heb. 8:4-5; Exod. 25-31; 35-40). So when John sees an altar in heaven, he is not seeing something new, but the heavenly reality to which Israel's worship had always pointed.

Within the tabernacle, there were two primary altars. The bronze altar stood in the courtyard, where sacrifices were offered. The altar of incense stood near the Most Holy Place, close to the ark of the covenant, which represented the throne of God. Both altars help us understand what John sees. The blood of the sacrifice was poured at the altar's base, and the incense rising before the Lord symbolized the prayers of God's people ascending into His presence. So when John sees the souls of the martyrs beneath the altar, he sees their lives as precious before God and their prayers as heard before His throne.

In the earthly tabernacle, a veil stood between the priests and God's immediate presence. But in heaven, no curtain hides His throne from His redeemed people. The martyrs are not far from God. They are beneath the altar, before the throne, and in the presence of the Lord God Almighty.

Now, picture what is happening before John's eyes. Those who suffered the ultimate cost for following Jesus are not behind the altar, nor are they on top of the altar. These saints are under the altar, which tells us that they are closest to the throne. Also, the martyrs are not passive, but are actively pleading for vindication in God's heavenly court. There is no magical language here, for their cries are raw and honest. There is no anger hurled before God, but cries of vindication in light of their understanding of who God is!

Notice what these dear saints include in their prayer: "**O Sovereign Lord, holy and true...**" Now let's stop there for a moment. The ESV translates the word well as "**Sovereign Lord.**" The Greek word used here is not the most common term for Lord, *kyrios*, but *despotēs*, and this is the only time it appears in the entire book of Revelation. The word these martyred saints use conveys absolute ownership, supreme authority, and sovereign mastery. We get our English word despot from this word, but while despot usually carries a negative meaning in English, that is not the case when *despotēs* is used of God in the New Testament. When used of God, it emphasizes His complete authority over creation, His servants, history, judgment, and justice.

This matters because these Christians are not merely crying out to God as sufferers, asking whether He cares. They are crying out to the One they know to be the Sovereign Master over all things. They are appealing to the One who has the authority to judge, avenge, vindicate, and bring history to its appointed end. They are not crying out in doubt. They are crying out in faith. They know He is able. They know He is holy. They know He is true. And they know that the Sovereign Lord will do what is right.

Notice what the saints attribute to God next. Not only is He the Sovereign Master, but He is holy. These saints who have suffered much understand that their God is utterly set apart from all evil, corruption, compromise, and injustice. He is not like the kingdoms and the kings of this world. He is not indifferent to injustice and the bloodshed at the hands of the wicked. He is not morally conflicted. He is pure in all His judgments, righteous in all His ways, and completely opposed to everything wicked. He is holy and these saints know it!

God is not only holy; He is also true. When these saints plead their case before the throne of God, they do so knowing that He is faithful to all He has promised. He does not forget. He does not make empty threats or hollow promises. What He has spoken, He will do (Num. 23:19; Josh. 21:45; Isa. 55:10–11; Titus 1:2; Heb. 10:23). So when these martyrs cry, “**How long?**” they are not questioning God’s goodness, nor are they doubting that He will keep His word. They are asking when the God who is holy and true will act in perfect faithfulness to His word and to those He has promised never to forsake (Deut. 31:6; Heb. 13:5; Rev).

The breaking of the fifth seal and the prayer of these suffering saints teach us an important truth about how we can and should pray. They pray from their understanding of who God truly is. This is the kind of thing we read about in Daniel 11:32: “...the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.” These saints know their God, and so they cry out, “**O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?**”

This prayer is not a contradiction of Jesus’ command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44). It is a plea to the holy and true God to judge evil, vindicate His people, and set the world right. Their cry is rooted in the justice of God, knowing that His Word teaches that vengeance belongs to Him and not to His people (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). The martyrs beneath the altar are asking God to do what only God has the right and authority to do.

The Throne: The Completion of God’s Purpose (v. 11)

Now, notice what happens next. God responds, meaning He heard their prayer. But He does not respond as we might initially expect. The God who is sovereign, holy, and true responds by giving these Christians white robes as a sign of honor, purity, and vindication. These robes signify the righteousness that is theirs because of Jesus. When we see this great multitude again in Revelation 7, we are told, “**They have washed their robes and made them white in the**

blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14). These martyred saints represent every faithful witness who has been slain for the word of God and the testimony they upheld—from the earliest martyrs of the church to our brothers and sisters suffering for Christ today. They are not treated as victims of random violence but as saints who belong to Christ and whose witness is precious before God.

God responds by giving them white robes and telling them to do the thing we all hate: wait. Verse 11 says they were told to “**rest a little longer.**” That word, rest, matters. God is not dismissing their cry. He is not ignoring their suffering. He is calling them to rest in His presence, assured that perfect justice will come in His appointed time and in His sovereign way. Why must they wait? Because other Christians will suffer as they did, and they must wait until their number is complete. This means God’s justice is not delayed because He is indifferent. It is delayed because His purpose is not yet complete. There are still more witnesses to be gathered, more saints to be strengthened, and more glory to be given to Christ through the faithful endurance of His people.

God’s answer to their prayer was to wait a little while longer.

Conclusion

My friend Shana frequently asked the same question you may have asked more than you can count: “How long O Sovereign Lord, holy and true...” It is the plea of the suffering. Shana was not a martyr, she was not killed by persecutors because of the word of God. She died on the operating table due to complications at the hands of surgeons who were trying to ease her suffering. Let me tell you what Shana did know. She knew what it meant to suffer in a world that is still waiting for Christ to make all things new. She knew what it meant to groan. She knew what it meant to wait. She knew what it meant to hope. I know that God used her life to encourage and strengthen the faith of others.

Revelation 6:9-11 teaches us that we need not pretend the pain we experience is small. We need not pretend injustice does not matter. We need not pretend that death is natural. We can cry “How long” and do so in faith, not despair. We can cry it to the Sovereign Lord, who is holy and true.

The Lamb who opens the fifth seal, is the Lamb who sees the suffering of His people. He honors the witness of His redeemed. He gives those who follow Him rest. The Lamb who died for you, is the Lord who will bring His purpose to completion for His glory and for your good!

So, my dear brothers and sisters, we wait. But we do not wait as people forgotten by the One who sits upon the throne. We wait as those who belong to the Lamb. We wait as those whose lives are precious before the One on the throne. And we wait with confidence that the One who is sovereign, holy, and true will do exactly what He has promised. We can trust Him to do what is good and right because that is who He is.