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Bridgeway Church
Revelation #16
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Sermon Summary #16

The Voice of the Martyrs Revelation 6:9-11

I want you to look at this photograph.



Often when we speak of those who suffer from persecution and martyrdom we hear only words and the impact on our hearts is minimal. So I want to begin this morning by putting a face with a name. His name is Sharoon Masih and he was sixteen-years old. I say “was” because three weeks ago, on August 27, during only his fourth day at school, he was savagely beaten to death inside his school by his classmates.

Against tremendous odds, Sharoon earned extremely high grades at his former school. His Christian teachers were so impressed by his academic abilities that they challenged his poverty-stricken parents not to put him to work but to encourage him to pursue higher education. His father Elyab Masih (35) saved some money from the work he does as a laborer on a brick kiln, and paid for the admission for Sharoon to enroll in a better school in Pakistan's Punjab Province. Because he was the only Christian in his grade, he was isolated from the very first day and endured endless taunting, even torture on the part of his classmates. They tried to convert Sharoon to Islam, but he resisted.

One Muslim student shouted at him: “You're a Christian; don't dare sit with us if you want to live.” While beating him, the attacking students shouted insults, but no teacher or administrator bothered to come to his aid. He died almost immediately. The lead teacher has since been dismissed and the primary suspect in the murder has been arrested. However, few other students feel any remorse for killing a Christian and no one is willing to implicate the other murderers by naming them.

The victim's mother, Riaz Bibi, said her son had been warned by his peers not to mix with Muslims at the school. She said her son was called a “chura,” a derogatory term which refers to the people who belong to the lowest caste, according to the hierarchy in some South Asian societies. His mother was quoted as saying:

“My son was a kind-hearted, hard-working and affable boy. He has always been loved by teachers and pupils alike and shared great sorrow that he was being targeted by students at his new school because of his faith. Sharoon and I cried every night as he described the daily torture he was subjected to. . . . The evil boys that hated my child are now refusing to reveal who else was involved in his murder. Nevertheless one day God will have His judgement.”

What happens when a Christian like Sharoon dies for his faith? Although the Apostle John is here concerned only with those whose deaths were violent, who were martyred because they refused to deny Jesus, their experience is no different from all believers who leave this world and enter the presence of Christ in heaven.

The Souls of the Martyrs in Heaven

Upon seeing his face and hearing of Sharoon’s brutal beating and death, I will understand if you find it difficult to concentrate today. So let me make it as easy as I can by simply drawing several observations from the passage we have just read.

What can we say about those who have been martyred for their faith? Of course, as I noted, all who have died in faith, whether martyred or by some other means, are included here. John focuses on the martyrs because he wants to encourage and inspire those believers in the seven churches in Asia Minor by reminding them that they need not fear death. They need not worry about what happens should they lose their lives for no other reason than that they love and treasure Jesus as Lord.

(1) The first thing that is obvious from what John says is that those who have died for their faith are *conscious*. They are keenly aware and conscious of the Lord’s presence and are able to articulate their request concerning what they hope God will do.

That they are very much alive, conscious, *able both to think and feel*, is seen in the fact that they “cried out with a loud voice.” Clearly they are experiencing deep and intensely passionate emotions as they ask God for justice.

It betrays an ignorance of the nature of apocalyptic language to ask how John could “see” “souls”. Again, the revelatory medium here is symbolic and visionary, not photographic literalism. Nevertheless, they are in a disembodied state (“souls”) and do not sleep. They are keenly aware of what happened to them.

This, then, is yet one more NT passage that portrays for us what theologians call *the intermediate state*. It is that condition or experience of all Christians who have died and are now in heaven. It is called “intermediate” because it is “in between” our experience now on earth and our experience that is yet to come when Christ returns and gives us our glorified and resurrected bodies (cf. 2 Cor. 5:1,8-10; Phil. 1:20-23). Those in the intermediate state are not “sleeping” or in a state of unconscious repose. They burn with desire for the purposes of God to be fulfilled on the earth and for righteousness and vindication of the truth.

(2) These believing “souls” are *“under the altar.”* The altar in view is probably the golden altar of incense which stood near the holy of holies (cf. 8:3-5; 9:13). The blood from the Day of Atonement was poured upon it and incense was regularly burned there (Ex. 30:1-10; Lev. 4:7; Heb. 9:4). Thus the altar is symbolic of the prayers of all God’s people.

Why are they *“under”* the altar rather than merely near it or beside it or in front of it? Greg Beale contends that in Revelation the “altar” is virtually synonymous with God’s throne (cf. 8:3-4; 9:13; 20:4,6). Thus, the point is the protection and security afforded the saints from the sovereign Lord who rules heaven and earth. Portraying the saints under the altar “emphasizes the divine protection that has held sway over their ‘soul’ despite even their loss of physical life because of persecution” (392).

(3) The *reason* for their deaths is made explicitly clear: they “had been slain for the word of God,” by which John means they had boldly and courageously stood up for Jesus and had borne “witness” to him. These are men and women who refused to back down when asked if they were Christians. They held their ground and knew that the only thing they needed to do to preserve and prolong their earthly lives was to keep their mouths shut. But they didn’t. Nothing, not even the threat of horrendous torture and execution could silence them.

You and I typically keep our mouths shut because we are threatened with . . . well, with what? Usually nothing. At most we stand to lose a client, a friend, an invitation to a Thunder game, or perhaps the respect of people that we admire. But no one has yet put a sword to my throat or a gun to my head. I haven't been evicted from my house or told that if I don't convert to Islam or merely deny Jesus that I'll lose my job or my home or my car.

Why was young Sharoon brutally and savagely beaten to death in his school classroom? It was because, like these in Revelation 6, he stood courageously for "the word of God" and did not back down from his "witness" concerning how Jesus had saved him.

These men and women, like Sharoon, were faithful unto death, not valuing their own lives above the gospel testimony. I'm reminded of Paul's confession when he spoke to the Elders of the church at Ephesus:

"I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life as precious nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:20-27).

People like Paul and Sharoon and the other martyrs in heaven testify that God is better than life. And they bear witness to that belief by sealing their confession with their blood. In this way they bear witness to the supreme value of God and knowing him.

If you are wondering how common martyrdom is, best estimates are that more than 100,000 Christians died for their faith during the past ten years. This means that on average there is one Christian killed every five minutes. Martyrdom has been a common experience for believers for the past two-thousand years, but especially in the 20th century. Experts tell us *more have died for their Christian faith in the 20th century than in all previous nineteen centuries combined.*

(4) They know ***God is in control.*** It is to the "Sovereign Lord" that they cry out. This confession is their acknowledgement that their deaths didn't catch God by surprise or disrupt his plans. They suffered martyrdom while the Sovereign Lord over all was in complete and utter control of what the enemies of Christ did and what the people of Christ suffered. Yes, Sharoon likewise lost his life under the sovereign control of a good and just God. And he knows it.

(5) They also know that ***God is holy.*** Yes, God is sovereign, and he could have intervened to protect their lives. He could have intervened to protect Sharoon. But in his infinite wisdom, he didn't. The suffering of the martyrs does not impeach or call into question God's holiness. His majesty is not marred or disfigured when his people die for their faith.

(6) They also know that ***God is true.*** He hasn't broken his promises. Their martyrdom is not a violation of anything God said to them. In fact, they were keenly aware of what Paul had said to Timothy, his spiritual son, that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

Sadly, when we suffer even a tiny bit for being a Christian we immediately question whether God is good. We begin to doubt whether or not he can be trusted. Has he lied to us? Is he incapable of stepping in and stopping those who oppress us? If he were truly good and holy, would he not put an end to persecution once and for all? Well, one day he will. But to suffer for Christ now is never a cause to question God's goodness or his greatness. In fact, it is an honor to be considered worthy to endure persecution for his name's sake.

At least, that is what Peter and the other apostles believed. We read in Acts 5 that after they were severely beaten for refusing to stop preaching about Jesus, "they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy

to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus]. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (Acts 5:41-42).

(7) We now come to *their prayer. It is a cry for justice*: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (v. 10). There are several things of great importance here.

For example, they are conscious of the passing of time. They ask “how long?” until God acts on their behalf. They were sensible of what it means to wait and to hope for something yet to come.

They also have a keen sense of divine justice. They wait in anticipation of God’s justice and vengeance on the enemies of his kingdom. Clearly they understand that it is not their responsibility or right to avenge the blood on those who had killed Christians (see Rom. 12:19). They knew that it was God’s prerogative to determine when and where and how. There is nothing wrong or unchristian to desire that God’s enemies and those who persecute God’s people be held accountable and judged for their wicked deeds (see Psalm 94:1-6).

A similar cry for vengeance is found in Psalm 79:5-6 and may provide the background for John’s language: “How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire? Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call upon your name!”

God doesn’t tell them they are misguided, that they shouldn’t desire justice on the enemies of Christ. In fact, they are simply turning back into prayer a promise that God made to them about what he would do to those who persecute the church. Here is how Paul put it:

“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed” (2 Thess. 1:5-10).

(8) The response is for them to be given “*a white robe*” as they are “told to *rest a little longer*.” The white robe is a symbol or sign of the righteousness of Christ imputed or reckoned to them through faith. This is the truth of justification by faith alone. John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, put it this way:

“Faith wraps the soul up in the bundle of life with God; it encloses it in the righteousness of Jesus, and presents it so perfect in that, that whatever Satan can do, with all his cunning, cannot render the soul spotted or wrinkled before the justice of the law. Yea, though the man, as to his own person and acts, be full of sin from top to toe, Jesus Christ covers all. Faith sees it, and holds the soul in the godly sense and comfort of it. The man, therefore, standing here, stands shrouded under that goodly robe that makes him glisten in the eye of justice” (John Bunyan, “Justification by an Imputed Righteousness,” in *Works*, 1:331).

The command to “rest” means they should not worry or be fearful that perhaps justice will never come. We need to hear this as well. We, too, are restless and impatient and wonder if God will ever step into history and bring justice to bear on those who hate him and his people. There is a reason why God has not done so up to this point in history. And that brings me to my last point.

(9) God’s delay in bringing justice against the unbelieving world is simply an expression of *his sovereign purpose and decree that many more suffer martyrdom*. There is a complete and explicitly specified number who must suffer martyrdom as these have. And the fact that Jesus has not yet returned is an indication that the total of those whom God has ordained will die in this manner has not yet been reached. In other words, God has it well within his perfect plan that a specified number, not one more or one less than he has willed, shall die for their faith.

Note well: (a) God has determined that many of his people should be killed at the hands of unbelievers; their deaths are neither an accident to them nor a surprise to God. (b) God has also determined to hold morally accountable those unbelievers who he knows will sin by persecuting his people.

Some say that what John means is simply that the mission of their fellow believers has not yet been fulfilled. But most argue that John's point is that the full number of those Christians whose destiny is to die for their faith has not yet been reached. This not only indicates that there is a specified number, ordained by God, who will suffer death, but also that *God knows precisely who they are*. This is why Jesus can't yet come back. The full number of martyrs ordained by God has not yet been fulfilled.

The restraint of God is thus due both to his longsuffering (granting extended opportunity to repent) and the fulfillment of his pre-ordained purpose. Only when all have been killed in accordance with God's plan will he act in judgment.

Conclusion

I grieve for the parents of Sharoon Masih. Their pain and suffering and sense of loss must be incredible. But if there is any comfort for them it is in knowing that their son was counted "worthy" to suffer for the name of Christ. Like the martyrs in Revelation 12, Sharoon did not love his life even unto death. And as horrific as his death was, he "conquered" Satan "by the blood of the Lamb" and "by the word" of his "testimony" (Rev. 12:11).