

In our reading for tonight, we see the Lamb continuing to open the seals on the scroll that was given to him. As he broke open the first four, of course, we saw the four horsemen, which symbolized the judgments that God had sent into the world. Things like war and turmoil and so forth. But something that we need to notice here, Christians, is that even as these seals are being broken open, the world does not repent of what it's doing. This is something that we're going to see throughout the whole book of Revelation. But even though God is sending his judgments down upon the earth, those who are opposed to him continue in their sins. They refuse to let go. If anything, they're doubling down on them. They're going to continue to oppose God, no matter what. And the problem with that is that they also attack the Church at the same time. And so we who believe in God are caught in a very difficult position. We have to suffer the things that are happening in the world, but we also suffer the hatred of the world. And caught in the middle of that, caught in that unenviable position, we're left asking a question: "How long, O Lord? How long is this going to go on? We don't know when it's going to end. How long will evil triumph? How long do we have to suffer? How long do we have to put up with this? How long before you do something about it?" Waiting is often hard, but waiting for God in the midst of our suffering can be the hardest thing of all.

And so, as the Lamb breaks open the fifth seal, John sees a new vision. Verse 9 of our reading says: "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." Now, to understand this, we have to remember that sometimes heaven is called God's temple. You take a passage like Psalm 11, for example, where it says: "The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven." And so being a temple, then, means that it has an altar, naturally, because it's just like the earthly temple. In fact, the earthly temple is supposed to be a copy of the heavenly one. But on this heavenly altar are offered up sacrifices, and the blood of those sacrifices flows down onto the ground. That's why these souls are described as being under the altar. It is those who have been, in a sense, sacrificed for God, those who have given their lives, who have paid the ultimate price in their love for Jesus. So in other words, the picture that we have here is of the martyrs.

But these martyrs are not silent. They cry out with a loud voice, verse 10 of our reading: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" I know we tend to think of martyrdom as something positive. The martyrs were steadfast unto death. They overcame everything. They remained loyal to Jesus even to the very end. But even despite all of that, Christians, there's still a problem here. Because despite everything that they have suffered for Jesus, they have been murdered by the world. And so being murdered means that something needs to be done. Something needs to be set right. God needs to do something about it. It's just like Abel, whom the Bible calls the first martyr of all. When Cain killed Abel, and God confronted Cain, God said to him, Genesis chapter 4: "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground." So the blood of Abel cried out to God to do something. Don't let me die in vain! And in the same way, the blood of the martyrs cries out to God to do something. Don't let us die for you in vain! How long before you will judge us? How long before you will avenge our blood? How long before you do something about it?

Now, Christians, I know that not many of us will become martyrs. Most Christians live their lives without ever having to pay the ultimate sacrifice for Jesus. But that doesn't mean that their question isn't also ours, especially when we are suffering in this world. Because how often do we

see everything that is happening and want to ask God: how long? We see the wars throughout the world, wars which never seem to come to an end, and all of the terrible things that go with it, and that leads us to ask: how long, O Lord, until you do something about it? We see all the turmoil in the world, the riots and all the troubles in our nation and communities, and it leads us to ask: how long before you do something about it? We see hard times, financial or famine or whatever it may be, and we ask: how long before you do something about it? And when we're faced with all the senseless deaths in our world around us, or we're faced with horrific things like trafficking, or we are faced with evil men being in control, it leads us to ask: how long, O Lord? How long before you do something about it? And waiting on God can be the hardest thing of all, especially while we are suffering as Christians.

But the martyrs are not despairing when they ask this question. They're not calling on God, thinking that he isn't going to be able to do anything about it. In fact, the only reason why they call on God is because they know that he will. They know that he will do something about it, even if they don't know when. And so listen to their question again from verse 10: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" They call him "Sovereign Lord," emphasizing his power, emphasizing his strength. You could even translate that as "Master." God is the one who can do something about it. God is the one who has the power to bring these things to an end. And so they call on him for that reason. And they call him "holy and true," because he is faithful. God does not say one thing and do another. God does not say something and then not do it. Whatever God says he's going to do is what he does. And so when they call on him, they know that he will do what he has promised to do. And what is that promise? Read a passage like Romans chapter 12, where it says: "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.'" Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. I am the one who will make all things right, says the Lord. God will bring justice. God will punish evil. He will bring all these things to an end, because he is just and true.

And so the martyrs are each given a white robe, symbols of their victory in Jesus. And they're told to rest a while longer, not because God is trying to get them to be quiet and stop bothering him, but rather they can rest confidently knowing that God is going to act. Because God knows the exact number of the martyrs. He knows exactly how many people will give their lives for him. And on the day that the blood of the last martyr is shed, God will bring perfect justice. He will make all things right forever.

And in fact, Christians, the sixth seal that the Lamb breaks open is an answer to that prayer! Because the earthquake which we see is a symbol of the presence of God. Think of Mount Sinai when God came down on the mountain and it shook. It's the same thing. The earthquake shows that God is there. And all the other things that we see--the sun, the moon, the stars, and so forth--are signs of his judgment. God is pouring out his wrath on all the evildoers of the world. In fact, we see this especially in a passage like Isaiah 13, where it says: "For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless." God has come to bring an end to everything evil. And the sky is rolled up, and the mountains and islands are taken out of their place, because there is nowhere to hide. There is nowhere to escape what is coming. No one is going to avoid receiving what they deserve for the evil they have done. And

there is great terror among the great ones of the earth, those who have persecuted God's Church, because they know that their end has come at last. They know that they're going to get what they deserve. And that's why they're afraid.

Christians, that day will be joy for God's people, because God is giving justice to his elect. It's like Jesus says in Luke 21: "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." On that day, we will wait no longer. On that day, the blood of every martyr will be vindicated. On that day, all the suffering that we have gone through will be repaid. Because on that day, God will come to judge the world in righteousness, and his judgment is true. So what a day that will be for his holy Church!

But Christians, if we know that he is going to do it then, we can also know that he can give us justice now. Because we're not resigned to just waiting for it to happen eventually, hoping that God will eventually take care of it. No, God can give us justice now. He can make all things right now. And even if we have to wait a while, he can still make it right even in this life. And even if we don't get the justice that we deserve in this lifetime, God will still make it right on the last day. Because God does not lie, Christians! God hears our cries, and he answers them, just as he has promised to do. Evil will not win. They will not succeed. God will give them what they deserve! And we can rest confidently, knowing that God will set all things right, either now or in eternity.

So Christians, be still and know that the Lord is God. He will make all things right. No evil will escape the judgment it deserves, because God is just and holy and true. He answers those who call on him. So trust him, because he will make all things right in the end.

Let us pray. Sovereign Lord, holy and true, hear us as we cry to you this day and set all things right as you have promised to do, because you will judge the world in righteousness. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.