

Suffering Witnesses—To What End?

A Sermon on Revelation 11:1-14

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We have been living in times shaped by God's apocalyptic judgments and human suffering. From the Holocaust to Hiroshima, from terrorism to genocide human suffering can be explained only as an eruption of the disorder of created existence. Such suffering lies beyond ordinary rational explanation. Such incredible suffering, especially that of innocent children, has led thinkers from Epicurus in the ancient world to many in our world to become agnostics or atheists. Where, they ask, is there any evidence of God in all this human suffering?

The book of Revelation also overwhelms us with the sounds of such suffering: from the four horsemen who roam the earth bringing wars, famines, slaughter, and death to judgments falling on the life-giving capacities of the earth and upon cities, nations, and empires. God's judgments fall continually upon the earth, some of which we understand in part when God's retributive justice falls on arrogant and cruel nations; such as Hitler's Third Reich and Stalin's Communist empire. Yet, God's corporate judgments are difficult to grasp or explain because the suffering they entail falls equally upon all even though all are not equally and in the same measure responsible. Still we believe that God's judgments are just and intend, this side of the final judgment, to call people and nations to repentance, to humility, to justice, and to peace.

On the other hand, the book of Revelation is filled with the sounds of a different kind of suffering experienced by those "who obey God's commands and hold to the testimony of Jesus." John writes in chapter 1:9: "I, John, your companion in the suffering, and kingdom, and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus." To be in Jesus is to share in suffering, a suffering like his having the same redemptive purpose. Its purpose is the defeat of Satan and the salvation of the nations. Consequently, in Revelation, the church is the witnessing church that may and often necessarily must become the martyr church: "They overcame him (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (12:11).

When the cosmic angel appeared in a vision, John in exile may have thought his suffering was over. The angel came not to rescue him, however, but to offer him a scroll to eat that tasted sweet as honey in his mouth but bitter in his stomach. Then came John's commission: "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings"—a commission to be carried out in the

midst of opposition and suffering. Some prefer the translation, “prophecy against,” that is, John comes exclusively with prophecies of judgments against the nations. Others, and I among them, prefer the translation, “about or concerning,” which leaves the outcome a bit more open, i.e., that John’s prophesying will be open to the outcomes of every announcement of God’s word prior to the final judgment, namely, both salvific and judgmental outcomes.

This theme is developed in the fascinating but difficult symbolic narrative-parable of Revelation 11, which describes the witnessing church and the outcome for the nations. Interestingly, this interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets (like the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals) contains themes both of suffering and tribulation and of security and salvation for his witnesses living in the midst of the tribulations that fall upon the nations.

The theme of security for God’s people is symbolically pictured as the measuring of the temple and the counting of the worshippers by which God sets protective boundaries around his people. Awareness of such protection is essential because the unbelievers are given freedom to trample on the Holy City for forty-two months, the time extending from Christ’s ascension to his return during which the church is commissioned to witness to the nations. While some identify the Holy City with earthly Jerusalem, it seems clear in Revelation that the symbol of the Holy City has been transferred to the church as the Bride of Christ. As citizens of the New Jerusalem living now during the history of the nations, the followers of the Lamb experience a real tension between their present experience of the rights and blessings of being citizens of God’s city and kingdom and the full enjoyment of such blessings when the New Jerusalem descends from heaven. In this present time when suffering and kingdom privileges go hand in hand, God calls his people to patient endurance and faithfulness in their witness to the nations.

The witnesses are described as two olive trees and two lampstands, symbols borrowed from Zechariah 4. There they refer to Zerubbabel the king and Joshua the high priest who were anointed by the Spirit to accomplish God’s purpose of rebuilding the temple. Strikingly, in Revelation the redeemed of the Lord are called a kingdom of priests, or even kings and priests, and the lampstands are the churches. The fact that there are two witnesses and not seven probably does not suggest that only two of the seven churches will be faithful. Rather the number 2 may refer to the royal-priestly nature of the church (both kings and priests) or that the number 2 is that required for valid testimony. As lampstands, the witnesses are the light of the world, and they receive extraordinary powers that prevents their premature demise: fire comes from their mouths and they have power like Elijah to shut up the sky so that it will not rain and power like Moses to turn water into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they desire.

Wow! That is some kind of protection, but who of us has it? It is probably easier to believe that some day God will so equip two special witnesses or perhaps send Elijah and Moses back to earth again. While it may be easier so to believe,

Revelation teaches that the witnessing and suffering church does have access to such power. In the vision of the seventh seal, God silences the loud praise of the heavenly creatures in order to listen to the prayers of the saints of earth. Then God actively responds to those prayers by sending the judgments of the seven trumpets, judgments that resemble the plagues in Egypt as well as the powers of Moses and Elijah. These trumpet-judgments falling upon the nations, sent in response to the prayers of the suffering and witnessing church, limit the power of evil in history, protect God's witnesses by restraining or even overthrowing powers arrayed against them, and call nations to repentance. Such powers of judgment are available to the witnessing church in history, but they can be accessed only through prayer (as with Elijah, the prayer of the righteous avails much). Without a doubt, it is a wise and good arrangement that such power belongs to God and not directly to us; for if it were directly in our hands to use willy-nilly, we would be tempted to destroy our individual enemies rather than endure suffering and martyrdom at their hands. However, God's first inclination is not to wipe them out as with a flood. Instead God exercises his power with a longsuffering grace and mercy until the final judgment.

A still-contemporary example of such prayers accessing the judgments of God occurred through the prayers of the Russian grandmothers who for decades prayed that their children and grandchildren would be free someday to enter the churches—and look what happened! Judgment fell, and the church doors sprung open. The witnessing and suffering church does indeed have such power.

Yet, a time comes when God allows the Beast from the abyss to overpower and kill his witnesses. Martyrdom is an essential part of God's plan for witnessing to the nations. The martyr-saints under the altar (fifth seal) were told to wait until the full number of their fellow servants were killed just as they had been. So, the death of the witnesses occurs in the great city, the city of the Beast, later called Babylon, that evil city filled with the blood of the prophets and of God's people and of many others. It is here called Sodom and Egypt and even the city where the Lord was crucified—but not literally Jerusalem because its inhabitants are from every people, tribe, language, and nation.

They killed the Lord's witnesses perhaps because they believed that the bad things that happened to them were caused by these witnesses. Or perhaps because the witnesses (God's people) refused to cooperate with their plans or participate in their civic celebrations, or worship their ideals or deities, as good citizens of their city and empire were expected to do. Instead, the witnesses acted as citizens of another city, another kingdom, and were perceived as a threat to the unity of this earthly city and empire. So, the citizens of this great human city were glad to be rid of these annoying witnesses; so glad, in fact, that they had a grand celebration, even dancing and rejoicing over the corpses of the witnesses lying in the streets of that great city.

What they did not know is that the death of the Lord's witnesses cannot be the end of the matter because these witnesses share in the resurrection of the

Lamb who was slain. Thus, in this symbolic narrative-parable, John describes their revival in language derived from the resurrection and ascension of Christ. After three and a half days, God's breath of life entered them (a phrase borrowed from Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones and the historical renewal of Israel). When these symbols are applied corporately to the martyred church, it implies that the church will always rise again as kings and priests because they share already in the resurrection life of Jesus and in his ascension and rule. These witnesses cannot be knocked off the throne that they share with Jesus. As Jesus said, "the gates of hell cannot prevail against the church."

Then came an earthquake, a judgment of God upon the world-city; a judgment elicited by the death of the martyred witnesses. The Lord responds to their death as if it was a prayer ascending to his throne, and he sends the judgment of the earthquake. This is an intriguing judgment because it does not totally shatter the world-city as it will in the seventh bowl (nor is it even one third or one quarter of the city as in the earlier patterns of judgments). Instead only one tenth of the city collapsed and only seven thousand perished—a just judgment of God, but to what effect? Does this location between the sixth and seventh trumpets signal a final judgment? I don't think so because it occurs within an interlude in which God addresses his church and what God says to his church in these interludes applies to his witnesses throughout the entire period until the return of Christ. Of course, as with any judgment, it is a piece of and anticipates the final judgment, but it is not final until Christ returns.

What effect then does this partial judgment by earthquake have? The survivors were fearful, and they gave glory to the God of heaven. What does that mean? Is it simply an acknowledgement of the justice of God's action because they had killed the Lord's witnesses? Some think so—just as Achan acknowledged that God was right and he was wrong. There is no evidence that Achan repented, simply that he gave God glory, that is, he admitted the juridical judgment of God was indeed just and true. Thus, some interpret the response of the survivors in the great city as follows: Their fear is simply terror while admitting that God's judgment is just.

Contrarily, can this phrase in Revelation—"giving glory to God"—imply true worship of God? One interpreter (Aune) actually describes this event as "the only instance in Revelation of people turning to God as a result of a punitive miracle" (p. 628). Is it, though, as Aune assumes, just a response to an earthquake or is it also a result of having heard the witnesses and seeing life and victory restored to them? Is it this combination that is the important lesson? Do the nations respond positively not just to the judgments of God but also to the judgments in the context of the suffering and martyred witnesses in their midst? How else can the nations perceive the intention and the significance of the judgments of God apart from the obedient lives and faithful witness of God's people? Can such judgments ever be understood apart from the faithful prophetic witness of the church?

In Revelation 14:6, “Giving glory to God” is associated with worship: an angel proclaims the eternal gospel to every nation saying, “Fear God and give him glory because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water.” The acknowledgement of God’s justice can keep the door open to the possibilities that Revelation holds out for the nations. For example, the song of Moses and the Lamb in Revelation 15 includes the declaration, “all nations will come and worship you.” In Revelation 21, the declaration is made that “the kings of the earth will bring their glory/splendor” into the City of God and that “the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.”

How will God accomplish this more positive relationship between the nations and his city? The pervasive answer in Revelation is shaped by the pattern derived from the Lamb who was slain, a pattern applied to the faithful witnesses. These witnesses become companions in the suffering that is ours in Jesus, a suffering that also has salvific effects. So, in summary, because chapter 11 is a narrative-parable of the suffering witnesses intended to be applicable throughout the history of the church, because the judgment on the universal city is partial and not total, and because the phrase, “to give glory to God,” on the lips of the survivors of the judgment allows for it, I believe that at this juncture in the book of Revelation we should keep the door open to the possibilities that God may have in store for the nations through his faithful and suffering witnesses.

Perhaps what happened to the church under Russian communism a decade or two ago was an episode to be understood in the light of the prophetic perspective of Revelation 11. The church that was silenced, oppressed, and even martyred for seventy years, witnessed judgments upon the nation. The breath of God renewed the life of the church and many brought up under atheism were and are being converted and are giving glory to God. This prophetic perspective is also being displayed today in China and more recently in India as the persecution and even martyrdom of Christians has both strengthened the church and contributed to the rapid spread of the gospel.

To view the matter in a broader historical perspective, while this vision about the martyrdom of the two witnesses has caused believers from the first century to the present time to believe that the persecutions and martyrdoms they endured were evidence that the end of history was near, time and again, God in his mercy has overthrown the persecutors and breathed new life into his church and allowed the history of the nations to continue. God desires that all nations worship him and bring their glory into his city. This is the reason history continues, the reason God’s judgments continue to fall upon nations and empires, the reason that the final judgment has not yet occurred, the reason that God’s call for a faithful witnessing and even martyr church still continues.

Martyrdom is not what it appears to be. It appears to be the cruel cessation of witness, but actually it is its empowerment because martyrdom is the example par excellence of how God’s kingdom of peace overcomes the violence of

empires and ideologies opposed to Christ. Martyrdom is a demonstration of the peace of Christ's kingdom as the martyr peacefully surrenders his or her life for the sake of Christ. God uses the martyr church to break through the violence of evil forces; we have seen throughout the history of the church that the church grows from the blood of its martyrs. Martyrdom is God's gift of grace to a violent world and it prepares the way for the coming of God's kingdom and city in which all nations will worship him.

Revelation 11 reminds us of the ascended Lord's call to us, the witnessing church: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (2:10).