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**FOLLOWING CHRIST IN
A FRIGHTENING WORLD:
THE CRY OF THE MARTYRS**
Revelation 6: 9-17

How many of you owned a horse when you were a kid? How many of you had that horse run away with you at some time? We owned an old range pony named "Monty." His lower lip always moved up and down so we called him "M-M-M-Monty." He was fine to ride as long as you didn't kick him into anything faster than a trot. The minute you forced him into a canter, he would take the bit in that tough mouth of his and head full speed for the nearest fence. Inches from the fence, he would throw on all fours and try to pitch you over his head onto the fence. I lost track of the number of times that darned horse tried to kill me in that fashion.

It is quite a frightening thing, the power of a runaway horse. They are big, strong, intimidating. Even today, the most effective crowd control presence in a large mob of people is a mounted police officer. Only if you have ever been on the receiving end of a horse's anger can you really appreciate the powerful image we studied last week in our journey through Revelation. In chapters 4 and 5, John recounts a vision of a heavenly throne room. The victorious Lamb of God has taken the scroll of human history away from the one who sits on the throne. He is the only one worthy to do so. And in chapter six, he begins to break the seals on that scroll. The first four seals are what we have come to know as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Imagine if you will the fearsome image of these four supernatural beasts as they ride across the heavens. In these four horsemen we get a glimpse of what will happen as the God's history for this world begins to wind down to its final, dramatic conclusion.

The first rider on the white horse represents what? Tyranny. Runaway power. The second horse, the red one, represents what? Runaway violence and warfare. The black horse represents what? Runaway famine. In the wake of runaway power and violence, the earth is scorched, black. Just like the

tummies of hungry children. Finally, the pale horse comes. I want to revise what I said last week. Upon further study, I don't think the traditional naming of that horse is adequate. It is not just pestilence. No, I think horse four is death. Death in every way. Violence, famine, plague...even wild beasts. The Fourth Horseman, Death, bats clean-up for the other three.

Pretty bleak images, aren't they? Let's continue on. The Lamb is about to break open the fifth seal. Let's lean over the shoulder of John and see what comes next.

With the breaking of the Fifth seal, another piece of furniture suddenly appears in the heavenly vision. What is the only piece of furniture so far? The Throne. Now what? An altar. An altar, of course, is a place of sacrifice. If you come from a Roman Catholic tradition, the table in the front is called the altar because the Mass is an enactment of the re-sacrifice of Christ. We call ours simply a Communion Table, or the Lord's Table because our sacrament is a feast, not a sacrifice.

But the listeners to John's Revelation would have been very familiar with an altar. Where was it located? In the temple. In fact, there were two altars in the temple. Outside the temple proper was the altar of burnt offering. Here is where the animals were slaughtered and burned by the priests in sacrifice to God. But inside the temple was another altar, the altar of incense. It stood just outside the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple area. Incense was offered up here symbolic of the prayers of the people. We will talk more about that in a coming message.

But what is unusual about the scene at this altar? Where is the action taking place? Not on top of the altar where the sacrifices ordinarily took place. Rather, UNDER the altar. John says, "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. What calamity is being spoken of here? The first four seals predicted tyranny, warfare, famine and death. To that, we now add religious persecution. Here are the martyrs, the ones who chose to die for the sake of their faith in Jesus.

But why "under" the table? Because that was where the blood of the sacrifice was gathered. In fact, Leviticus 4 says that when a bull is sacrificed his blood shall be poured out at the base of the

altar. Before the Jerusalem temple was destroyed, it had an intricate drainage system which carried away the thousands of gallons of sacrificial blood that was spilled in the slaughter of animals every day.

But this isn't bull's blood that cries out. It is the blood of the martyrs, the sacrifice of those who were willing to pay the ultimate price for their devotion to Jesus. And there's something else that adds to the eeriness of this scene. Not only does John SEE the souls of the martyrs under the altar; he hears their voices-- crying out as if they are one--in a loud voice. And what are they crying? The cry of every soul that has ever been snatched away by tyrants...the cry of every soul that has ever endured the temporary victory of evil over good. "How long!" "How long!," they cry. "How long, Sovereign Lord, until you judge those who wronged us. How long before you avenge our blood?"

The Greek is interesting here. Many of you will be familiar with the Greek word for Lord, "Kurios." But that is not the word that is used here. Interestingly, the word for Sovereign Lord is "despotes." What English word is derived from that? Despot. Despot, to us, means tyrant, unjust, cruel, heartless ruler. In Greek, however, it means absolute sovereignty, absolute power. The blood of the martyrs cries out saying, "How Long God, you who are the absolute ruler over all, will you allow these petty and temporary despots to tyrannize your faithful followers?"

It is a question as old as humanity. "God, why do you allow these awful, evil, godless people to flourish while we, your beloved, your faithful followers, are brutalized?" It is a word we hear repeatedly in the Psalms, in Jeremiah...throughout the writings of the Old Testament. And frankly, it's a good question, isn't it? It is in these earthy, genuine, angry moments that scripture reflects the emotions many of us have experienced. Why **do** the scumbags of the earth get away with murder while the good people continue to suffer?

The response is interesting. Perhaps we expect God to immediately vindicate the lives of the precious souls who died for his sake. But that's not the answer is it? Instead, they are wrapped in white robes, this white garment for the godly is a repeating theme in Revelation, and they are told to wait a while longer. Why? Because the number yet to be killed is not complete. I believe it would be a mistake to understand this to

mean that God has decided a certain number of martyrs must die and, until that number is reached, will not avenge their deaths. Here is what I think it means: Not yet. I am not ready to do what you ask just yet. Let me wrap you in the protection of my righteousness and love and peace. But you must wait. You long for vengeance. I tarry so that I might save as many as I can. I alone can decide when the time for judgement has come. In the meantime, wait and trust me.

But the sixth seal does bring at least a partial answer to their cry. Up until now, the calamity of the end times has been primarily the doing of evil-inspired men: Tyranny, warfare, war-induced famine, death, religious persecution. But with the sixth seal, even nature gets into the act, doesn't it? Nature itself begins to come apart at the seams. Horrendous earthquakes that cause the mountains and islands themselves to change shape. Sounds incredible, doesn't it?

I lived in earthquake country for a while. I will never forget standing on a golf course in Bakersfield, CA when the San Andreas fault decided to move again. I watched down the twelfth fairway as the earth actually undulated up and down, like a roller coaster. A man was standing near the green and began screaming in fear. I couldn't help laughing. I thought, "You are out in the middle of nowhere away from all falling objects. You couldn't be in a safer place if an earthquake was going to strike." But that was nothing. The San Francisco earthquake of 100 years ago was nothing. The entire geography of the world will change as the earth itself cries out in the final throws of pain at the rebellion of the world.

The sky will turn black. How many of you had that experience in 1980 when St. Helens blew? My mom said she thought the end of the world had come. Huge asteroids falling from the sky and hitting the earth. It is nature in absolute bedlam.

And notice the result. Suddenly, it is not the martyrs whose voices are crying out. Now, it is the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty...as well as every slave and every other person...that are crying out. But unlike the faithful, they cry not to God but to the mountains and rocks themselves. Begging for suicide. Begging to have the mountains fall on them because that would be better than to face the wrath of the one who sits on the throne and of the Lamb.

Finally, it appears, they are getting it. Finally, it appears, the God whom they have denied, whose followers they have oppressed, whose witnesses they have killed, whose creation they have abused, whose children they have exploited...that God has become real to them. But real in a fearsome way. For the God who has been patient, the God who has held back his hand of wrath, the God who has postponed his judgment in the hope that others might turn to him, has had enough.

One of the themes that ties these two vivid passages together is the cry of the people. In the Fifth seal, it is the cry of the martyrs wondering how long God will allow this injustice to continue. In the Sixth seal, it is the cry of the ungodly who have refused to turn their hearts to God in spite of all the evidence of his existence and gracious goodness.

It seems to me that one of the questions this vivid and frightening text poses to us is, what will be the cry of our hearts when we encounter runaway calamity in our own lives. And don't kid yourself, you WILL experience runaway calamity. There will be seasons in your life where everything seems to hit you at once. A tyrant of a boss fires you for no good reason. The blood red hand of violence lays hold of you as it did a woman related to our congregation whose brother was murdered two weeks ago. Perhaps it will be the black horse of famine or poverty that tromps on your life. Or a season of sickness and death. Perhaps it will even be persecution for your Christian faith.

When you are run over by calamity, what is your default response? Like the foolish people in the sixth seal, do you tend to rail at the circumstances? Rage at the stock market? Rage at the X-ray? Rage at the corporation that cut back your job? It is as fruitless as crying out to mountains and rocks. They are deaf. They will not hear. They will not help. All you hear back are the echoes of your own shaking voice.

Or will you cry out to God. Honestly, genuinely, sharing your hopes and pains and anger at what is occurring, allowing yourself to be wrapped in his love and protection until he is prepared to finally answer the cry of your heart?

There is another question that this text poses to us, a more troubling question perhaps. If we were called upon to give our

life for the sake of the gospel, would we do it? Do you ever wonder what you would do if you were faced with a choice of denying Christ or dying? We hear about people who have been willing to face the sword, the axe, the flame rather than deny Jesus and we are certainly inspired. But we also find it intimidating. Would I have the courage to pay the ultimate price for the Savior who paid the ultimate price for me?

Those of you who will join me on the Reformation Tour this summer will absolutely love St. Andrews, Scotland. There is more Reformation history packed into that little town than any other place I know of. We will look down at the cobbled stoned inscription "PH" which marks the site where on March 1st, 1527, Patrick Hamilton was burned at the stake for his Christian convictions. A bit farther and we will stand over the site where George Wishart was hung and burned in 1543. We will pass the place where Henry Forrest was martyred, where Walter Mylne was burned.

We hear such things and are prone to say, "Yes, well, that was 500 years ago. A different land. A different time. Surely no one is martyred for their Christian faith today." Really? Our friend Harold Kurtz, director of Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, sent these words to me this week:

There are literally thousands of Christian martyrs in the South Sudan every year!! There are more martyrs there than in any country in the world perpetuated by the fundamentalist Muslim government of the north. These murders are primarily for political reasons but there is a definite ethnic and religious cleansing going on. They feel if they can wipe out the Christian population, or at least break its back, they can control everything.

Dave Dobler, when he was moderator, told about flying into an airstrip near a village where Presbyterians had gone with the Gospel almost 100 years ago. He was going there to take the condolences of the PCUSA to that community and bring them our love and comfort. A short time before the congregation was at worship in the church built with a brick wall and grass roof. As they worshiped, they were attacked. The roof was set on fire and as the congregations rushed out, machine guns raked them, killing many of the congregation. As Dave and

others were walking from the airstrip with the pastor who met them, local people carrying grass and poles kept joining them. Dave asked what they were planning to do with that? The pastor replied that they were going to rebuild the church. Dave was astonished and said, "Are you going to rebuild that church after all that has happened to you?" "Yes," replied the pastor, "We are going to make the fields of death into the fields of Life."

The startling news in all of this is that the church is exploding! Caroline reports hearing them say over and over again, "Jesus is our only hope, in life and in death." And around that assurance of God's love and Jesus' presence amazing church growth is taking place. The Presbyterian Church alone, not to count the Baptist, Episcopal, or Catholic, some are estimating to be nearing a million people!

We may never have the privilege of dying for our faith in Christ. But if we do not, it's not because we were not warned that it is a possibility. What did Jesus say to those who would follow him? "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"

We may never have the privilege of dying for our faith in Christ. But we do have the privilege of living for it. Paul puts it this way in these profound words from Romans 12: I appeal to you therefore, Brethren, by the mercies of God, present your BODIES as LIVING SACRIFICES, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

Are you prepared to give your life for Jesus Christ? Are you prepared to LIVE your life for Jesus Christ?

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *THE CRY OF THE MARTYRS* *Revelation 6:9-17*

Pastor Mark Toone
January 30, 2000

- Re-read the first eight verses of this chapter. How do the fifth and sixth seals connect with the first four?
- Why are the saints "under the table?" What is the nature of their lament to God? Do you agree or disagree with what they are asking? Have you ever asked something similar of God?
- What was God's response to their request? What do you think of that response? Does God have a certain number of people that must be martyred before he can finalize his purpose on this earth? What's holding him back?
- Many in America believe that we will be spared the great tribulation. Yet Christians all around the world are dying for their faith. How do you explain this thinking? What do we suppose that we should be spared what Jesus seemed to promise was a possibility, namely that we take up our cross and follow him. Was Jesus speaking literally here?
- The martyrs cried to God; the rest of the people cried out to the mountains and rocks. What is your tendency when you discover calamity overtaking you? To cry to God or rail against your circumstances?
- Pray together