

## Intercessory Prayers of the Saints in the Apocalypse

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### ABSTRACT

*In this paper three biblical passages which explore the prayers of the saints are examined. (1) In Revelation 5:8 prayers are offered up with incense and received into the presence of the One on the Throne and the Lamb in the context of a great crowd of heavenly worshippers. (2) Revelation 8:3-5 describes the offering of prayers of the saints at the golden altar in a similar scene. The resultant cosmic disturbances show that God is about to respond directly in judgement and in bringing in the kingdom. And (3) Revelation 6:9-11 depicts the souls of the martyrs from under the altar pleading for God to act in judgement on those who had shed their blood. The response was for them to rest a little longer until the complete number of the martyrs would be fulfilled.*

*The significance of these prayers and the responses they provoke are studied to assess the implications of intercessory prayer in the face of suffering in the lives of the faithful today. God is sovereign. He does hear and respond to the cries of the faithful and through their prayers will act to bring in his victorious kingdom.*

The Roman world of the first century of the Christian era had many similarities with the Western world today. Small numbers of faithful believers living in secular or pagan societies were facing growing pressure to conform to society's norms. They were experiencing opposition from their communities, governments, members of other faiths, neighbours and even at times their own families. The message of the Apocalypse is timely for many twenty-first century Christians. In times of trouble, despair, persecution, opposition and powerlessness, prayer may be the only recourse for bringing strength and comfort through communion with the Lord God Almighty. But some may ask, "Does God really hear?" "What difference does prayer make?" "How should we pray?" The prayers of the saints in the book of Revelation provide some compelling answers.

The central purpose of the writer of the book of Revelation was to encourage believers in the early days of the Christian church to remain faithful to Christ in the context of growing hostility from a pagan environment. He reminds his readers that the Lord God is almighty and in control of all earthly powers, including that of the Roman emperor and all his agents who carry out his commands in the far flung provinces of the empire. This revelation demonstrates that evil will not ultimately succeed. In due time God will subject all earthly authorities to his will, judge those who oppose him and establish justice and peace in the new heaven and earth. Readers are encouraged to persevere no matter what persecution or opposition they encounter, even if they go to a martyr's death. God will bring salvation to the faithful and wipe away every tear. They may be

weak, powerless and victims of innocent suffering, but God “*knows*” their situation, actions and afflictions. He will hear their cries.

It is in the context of worship of this all-powerful God that the writer refers to “*the prayers of the saints*.” He uses the word *προσευχαι* (*proseuchai*) which is the most common word for prayer in the New Testament, and which means intercession, petition, or supplication. Three passages are relevant to this present study. Two mention “*the prayers of the saints*” (5:8 and 8:3,4) and one describes the martyrs “*under the altar*” who cry out to God (6,9,10). Richard Bauckham considers these passages “a threefold repetition of one prayer” (253). A fourth possible prayer is the call to “*Come*” in 22:17 &20. Bauckham considers it a prayer of petition for Jesus to return (252) and

for the coming of God’s kingdom, for the completion of God’s purposes for his creation, for the fulfilment of all that God has promised, for everything that is finally to come, and, in the end, for God himself to come to his creation to perfect it by his own presence throughout eternity (253).

These words are however quite ambiguous and require further exploration. Other commentators draw different conclusions, e.g., that the reference to “*Come*” is a call to readers who are not yet committed to ‘Come’ (*ερχου*, *erchou*) to Jesus (Osborne, 793).<sup>1</sup> This is in keeping with the immediate context of the Spirit and bride calling to the thirsty to come (22:17) and seems the more likely of the possible interpretations. This paper will therefore exclude a study of these verses. We turn thus to the three relevant passages.

### Revelation 5:8

*When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.*

The initial reference to the prayers of the saints comes within the enthronement worship scenes of chapters 4 and 5. John’s vision of the throne and the heavenly beings who ceaselessly worship the One on the Throne in chapter 4 is paralleled in chapter 5 by the worship of the Lamb in a similarly exalted position. He stands as if slaughtered, and is announced as one who is worthy to open the scroll and usher in the judgments of God. A widening crowd of heavenly worshippers gathers around the Lamb, falling down before him, singing his praises and pronouncing him worthy “*to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing*” (5:12) for he

<sup>1</sup> Also Charles, Ladd, Mounce & Beale.

was slaughtered and by his blood ransomed “*saints from every tribe and language and people and nation*” (5:9).

Within this magnificent heavenly enthronement ceremony “*the prayers of the saints*” are offered and received.<sup>2</sup> The content of these prayers is not directly specified, but Bauckham (255) examines the songs of worship which provide the immediate context for 5:8, and posits that the prayers concern God’s kingdom and the roles of serving and reigning which saints will fulfill at its coming.

Προσευχαι refers to “normal, familiar, acts of prayer, individual or collective” (Swete, 80). It is understood that the pray-er will approach God’s holy presence with reverence and awe, as he/she presents intercessions or supplications. Prayer acknowledges that God alone is the “one adequate source of help” (Filson, 23) and that he is positively inclined to accede to the pray-er’s requests.

The ‘*saints*’ (ἁγίων)<sup>3</sup> who pray are not specified as particularly ‘holy’, so much as people who are in relationship with God (Aune, 1997, 359), and have been separated “to Himself through Christ, the Spirit and the gospel” (Thomas, 398). Some believe the term refers to all God’s people down through the ages (Swete, Charles) or those who have prayed for God’s kingdom to come (Ladd, 89). Others identify them with the martyrs of 6:9 or as “a witnessing company ...on earth during the apocalyptic outpouring of wrath”<sup>4</sup> (Thomas, 398).

The prayers are presented by the “*twenty four elders*” in the context of a multisensory experience of worship, with hearing (choral and instrumental music), sight and smell all involved as the drama unfolds. The elders are “*each holding a harp<sup>5</sup> and golden bowls<sup>6</sup> full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.*” In Jewish practice the offering of incense and prayer was closely associated<sup>7</sup> and occurred daily in the temple where priests offered incense on the altar of the holy place, while

<sup>2</sup> A number of scholars consider “*which are the prayers of the saints*” as a gloss introduced from 8:3. (Beckwith, 512; Charles I:144-45; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 358). They reason that nowhere else are prayers directed to the exalted Lord, except here and in Rev 5:14 and it was not customary practice for prayers to be part of a worship scene. Προσευχαι (prayers) and Προσκυνειν (worship) are always directed to God (Greeven in Kittel Vol 2, 806). Others disagree, because these scholars have no other reasons for their conclusion, and there is no manuscript evidence (Thomas, 1992, 397; Osborne, 267). Sweet considers the writer’s propensity “to take earthly realities into account when dealing with heavenly scenes” (as cited in Thomas, 1992, 397) means this is not as unusual as may be thought.

<sup>3</sup> Mentioned twelve times in the Apocalypse

<sup>4</sup> Also described in 12:17; 13:7-10

<sup>5</sup> The harps (κιθαρα) were ten or twelve stringed instruments which accompanied the singing of psalms and songs of praise (Josephus as cited in Aune, 356).

<sup>6</sup> Φιλας were shallow cups or bowls used for drinking or offering incense or libations (Mounce, 146 fnt 18). Those in the Tabernacle were brass (Ex 27:3), but in Solomon’s temple they were gold (1 Kings 7:50).

<sup>7</sup> Some see incense as (1) accompanying prayer, or (2) symbolic of prayer (Caird, 107) or (3) synonymous with it as inferred by Ps 141:2 (Bruce as cited in Mounce, 102; Swete, 80).

the worshippers prayed (Lk 1:10, Ex 30:7, 8). Here as the smoke from the incense ascended it provided visible evidence of the prayers ascending to God. Its sweet smelling fragrance illustrated their being acceptable to him (Osborne, 345) and its enduring aroma reminded worshippers that prayers are not quickly forgotten. Charles sees the offering of incense as a necessary sacrifice providing access to God (I, 231, against those who believe that Jesus' death on the cross is the only sacrifice necessary for prayer to be heard).

Judaism considered it an angelic function to carry prayers into God's presence in a priestly role (Tobit 12:11-15; 3 Baruch 11:3-9; Test. Dan. 6:2).<sup>8</sup> In 8:3 "*another angel*" fulfils this task, but here it is *twenty four elders* who deliver the prayers. Mounce therefore concludes that they were "an exalted angelic order who serve and adore God."<sup>9</sup> Most disagree and suggest a number of other solutions to their identity which are summarized by Smalley (116).<sup>10</sup> Although they appear seven times in the book and play a significant role there is little general agreement as to who these elders are (Beale, 322; Witherington, 121). Aune comments that the writer appears uninterested in the question (288). The most important factor is that having been presented to God, the prayers, petitions and intercessions are heard. "Prayer does not take place in vain, and die away unheard, but reaches God and moves the powers of heaven." (Schlatter as cited in Beasley-Murray, 151, footnote 1).

This understanding is of great comfort to believers, especially those who are enduring suffering or persecution.

### Revelation 8:3-5

*Another angel with a golden censor came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the*

<sup>8</sup> Tobit names Raphael, while Baruch mentions the archangel, Michael, as performing this function (Mounce, 147).

<sup>9</sup> Mounce (.135) considers that the elders' song of praise about the saints ransomed by Christ's blood (5:9,10) means they are not the church, so they must be angels.

<sup>10</sup> The elders may (1) partially correspond to the 24 priestly courses of second temple period, 1 Chron 24:7-19; (2) be the 24 orders of Levites who sang and prophesied (1 Chron 25:6-31); (3) Old Testament saints; (4) two sets of twelve representing the whole people of God- patriarchs and apostles, Rev 21:12-14; (5) the church in its totality (Swete, 69) (6) an exalted angelic order (or kings) of the heavenly court; (7) Christian martyrs who are rewarded with crowns and thrones; (8) 24 star gods of the zodiac; (9) the traditional 24 authors/prophets of the Old Testament books. (Also Aune 288-92; Beale 322, 357; Beasley-Murray 113-4; Beckwith 498-9)

*angel. Then the angel took the censor and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth: and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.*

The second mention of “*the prayers of the saints*” comes in 8:3-5 within a slightly different scenario, although incense is again involved. The judgements of the six seals have been announced and this appears to act in such a way as to introduce the seventh. Immediately prior to this event “there was silence in heaven” (8:1).<sup>11</sup> Whatever conclusion one reaches as to its purpose, it seems that the tumultuous heavenly worship is silenced so the prayers of God’s suffering people receive attention<sup>12</sup> (Beasley-Murray, 150; Witherington, 139). For some this demonstrates that God’s concern for his people outweighs his desire to receive the worship of all the heavenly hosts (Charles, I:224).

In Jewish practice every day a priest would take burning coals from the altar of sacrifice and place them on the altar of incense (Luke 1:9,10) (Witherington, 139), mixing them so the fragrance ascended with the prayers. Here, “*another angel with a golden censor came and stood at the altar*” and performed the priestly role of presenting “*a great quantity of incense ... with the prayers*” to God. Beckwith (553) suggests the incense “(re)-inforces” the prayers. Thomas writes that “incense gives efficacy to the worship accompanying it, and the smoke cloud (cf 8:4) symbolizes the divine acceptance” which means “the answer is also guaranteed” (1969, 125). As the prayers “enter the presence of God by way of the altar” Mounce sees “something sacrificial about genuine prayer” (182).

These prayers are offered on the golden altar before the throne. It is unclear what the primary purpose of this altar is. Some favour it as being a heavenly replication of the two altars in the tabernacle/temple: the altar of incense in the holy place and the altar of sacrifice for burnt offerings outside. Others see the angels in Revelation moving between the altars to perform their various roles (Beckwith, 552; Ladd, 125-6). Charles points out that Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings contain no evidence for two heavenly altars (I:172, 227). Most therefore conclude that there is only one altar (of incense) in these heavenly scenes, but some blending of the two altar images occurs (Beale, 455; Osborne, 343; Thomas, 1995, 442).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This appears to be a dramatic pause before the judgements fall (Beckwith, 550), or a return to the silence prior to the old creation and before the appearance of the new creation (Beasley-Murray, 149f); or in recognition of God’s presence as a prelude to prayer (Aune, 508); Beale considers it “a metaphor with multifaceted meanings and associations” all involving judgement (451).

<sup>12</sup> There is no hint that God is unable to hear the prayers of his people because of other distractions or noises.

<sup>13</sup> This particularly relates to our discussion of 6:9

Opinions vary as to whether these “*prayers of all the saints*” encompass. They may include wither (1) all prayers, (2) the prayers of only the martyrs or (3) only those prayed to invoke the coming kingdom (Matt 6:10; Bauckham, 257; Ladd, 89; MacLeod, 459). The use of “*all the saints*” precludes them from being the cries of martyrs only (6:9,10) but may include all who call to God (Aune, 515; Osborne, 259) for help, comfort, strength & understanding in times of suffering or persecution (Reddish, 160). Considering the “*great quantity of incense*” these prayers probably include all prayers of “*all the saints*” down through the ages - an innumerable gathering (7:9). Believers may be a despised group, but from an eternal perspective they occupy an honoured position with their prayers presented to God in “*a golden censor ... on the golden altar.*”

Prayer is an integral part of the relationship of all God’s people with him and involves adoration, thanks and intercession by individuals and as a corporate body (Witherington, 141). Through prayer, believers draw close to God, communing with him and coming to know him more. Prayer is a spiritual sacrifice, assisted by heavenly beings fulfilling a priestly role, offered with the incense whose smoke can be seen ascending and whose fragrance permeates the heavenly throne room. There is no doubt that God hears and responds to all the prayers while the whole company of heaven is stilled to receive them as a pleasing, acceptable offering to God. Ng states that the “*God who answers prayer is also the God who assists us in prayer*” (135).

Following these events, and in response to the prayers offered, the angel filled his censor with coals from the same altar and threw them down to earth.<sup>14</sup> The resultant cosmic disturbances of thunder, rumblings, lightning and earthquakes show God is about to respond directly (Thomas, 1969, 125). His judgments (announced in the seven trumpets) are about to be ushered in. “*God has willed that the prayers of his people should be part of the process by which the kingdom comes*” (Beasley-Murray, 151). Faithful believers should find great comfort and encouragement in knowing that God listens and acts in response to their prayers.

### **Revelation 6:9-11**

*When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth? They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of the their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.*

<sup>14</sup>Ezekiel 10:2-7 has a similar vision depicting God’s glory leaving the temple and the beginning of his judgements.

We turn now to the only prayer of petition in Revelation.<sup>15</sup> It is uttered by “*the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony [witness] they had given*” who were beneath the altar. This scene is again in the heavenly throne room of the temple and depicts the fifth seal showing the church “in its persecuted, suffering state” as it relates to the whole sweep of human history (Swete, 89)<sup>16</sup>. It seems their cry is important “in anticipation of and precipitating the approaching Day of Judgement” (Carlson, 88).

These pray-ers are usually referred to as ‘martyrs’, but Beale states that this “is not a narrow reference to a group of literal martyrs but a figurative representation of *all* saints who suffer to whatever degree” (455).<sup>17</sup> After a semantic study of the changing use of the noun μαρτυς (witness, martyr) and its cognates<sup>18</sup> Trites concludes that at the time of writing of Revelation μαρτυς and its cognates contained the more prominent idea of verbal testimony (76, 78) or the “juridical meaning” of witnesses giving testimony to their faith (80), but he allowed that it “probably includes death as part of the witness”. It was only in the late second century when μαρτυς absolutely referred to martyrdom. (74).<sup>19</sup>

The martyr/witnesses are described as *having been slain* (εσφαγμενων). The word is the same as that used to describe the Lamb *having been slain* in 5:6, which implies that the writer is identifying the suffering and death of these martyr/witnesses, with those of Christ who gave his life/soul (ψυχας Lev 17:11 LXX). Being ‘*under the altar*’, suggests comparisons with the animal sacrifices on the altar for burnt offering (Lev 1:1-9) (Thomas 1969, 124; Mounce, 157; Charles, I:174), where the victim’s blood was poured out at the altar base (Lev 4:7) (Beckwith, 525). Phil 2:17 and 2 Tim 4:6 are sometimes used to support this view, but the imagery of both passages is associated with drink offerings rather than sacrificial death. Many martyrs in the early centuries of the church drew great comfort in considering that their death would be a sharing in Christ’s suffering (1 Pet 4:13; Rom 8:17).

Others interpretations have been suggested. Some see their position under the altar shows the rabbinic concept of “the souls of the righteous are kept under the throne of glory” (Shabb. 152b as cited in Charles, I:228; Witherington, 135). They believe this privileged position, close to God’s

<sup>15</sup> We previously discussed the plea of “*Come*” repeated three times in chapter 22 and concluded that the context favours this as a call to readers to come to a point of commitment, rather than a prayer for Jesus to come.

<sup>16</sup>It is hard to see how this judgement is similar to the other seals because they demonstrate “God’s wrath against earth dwellers” (Thomas, 440) and not against those in heaven who faithfully witness to him in persecution. Thomas considers the judgement is God’s response in avenging the deaths of his witnesses.

<sup>17</sup> See also Blount as cited in Smalley, 157.

<sup>18</sup> μαρτυριον (proof), μαρτυρια (testimony) and μαρτυρειν (verb, witness)

<sup>19</sup> An important source for Trites study was the later work, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

throne, demonstrates that they now enjoy total safety in his care. (Charles, 1:228; Morris, 108; Beale, 392).<sup>20</sup>

The reason for their death is stated as *“the word of God and for the testimony they had given”* which may be interpreted in two ways, (1) that they had given testimony concerning Christ (Osborne, 285), or (2) that Christ had given testimony which they had received, preserved and followed faithfully to the end (Aune, 1998, 406; Ladd, 104). Both involve giving witness and culminate in death. Nowhere is it suggested that faithful witnesses will be preserved from death, but death itself is never seen as final. It is always regarded as a transition into the presence of God where there is no more mourning, crying or pain (21:4). Ladd comments that “it is the very nature of the church to be a martyr-people” (Ladd, 104). Suffering for the faith should be expected.

They *“cried out with a loud voice.”* Their plea is dramatic and intense. These are not bystanders. These sufferers have been in the thick of the action. The use of the aorist tense (εκραξαν cried out) appears “to refer to a single definite prayer” not a continuous plea (Charles, 1:174). They address God as the *“Sovereign Lord”* (δεδιοτεες) emphasizing their trust in his absolute power and authority. Their designation of him as *“holy and true”*, describes his character as being righteous, apart from evil and faithful to his promises to vindicate his suffering people -- even though they personally have lost their lives.

They plead, *“How long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?”* This cry for judgement and vengeance (εκδικεις) has been much debated, because it seems to contradict Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies (Matt 5:44) and the attitude of forgiveness which he and Stephen displayed towards their executioners (Luke 23: 43; Acts 7:60). Glasson will not even classify it as a Christian prayer (as cited in Mounce 158) and claims (with others) that it is Jewish, in similar vein to the cries of innocent victims in various apocalyptic writings.<sup>21</sup> Ladd explains the incongruity of their cry, by stating it is the ‘blood’ which cries out for vengeance<sup>22</sup>, not the martyrs themselves (106).

Not all Christian martyrs have faced their tormentors with forgiveness, some have threatened them with divine judgement (Barclay, 15).<sup>23</sup> Most agree however that their cry is not one of personal

<sup>20</sup> Brent sees close parallels in this passage with the cult of emperor worship. He derives this from an inscription on a large stone altar from the temple of Roma and Augustus in Pergamon (Brent, 95).

<sup>21</sup> 1 Enoch 9 and 10; 47; 91-104; Testament of Moses 9 and 10

<sup>22</sup> Similar to the blood of Abel (Gen 4:10).

<sup>23</sup> Tertullian wrote that “the spectacle to which the Christian most looked forward was to see his one-time persecutors writhing in hell.” (Tertullian as cited in Barclay, 15)

vengeance. They are no longer on earth or subject to sin. Their being clothed in white robes indicates their innocence (6:11).

They cry for God to *judge and avenge* (ἐκδικεῖς).<sup>24</sup> The shedding of human blood requires compensation or retribution, but the Scriptures always give that role to God, as the “avenger of blood” (Rom 12:19) (Aune, 1998, 408). By crying to him these martyr/witnesses in his presence, affirm his sovereignty and the need for his “supreme justice to be established” (Smalley, 162). Their faithfulness which brought about their deaths, leads them to plead for him to vindicate both his name and theirs (Beale, 392; Kelley, 379) before “*the inhabitants of the earth*.”<sup>25</sup> This is in line with Caird’s explanation that their cry uses the legal language of public justice (85). Those who were previously condemned in human courts, now bring their plea to the heavenly court. In Hebrew law-courts the plaintiff pleaded his/her own case. If the judge ruled they were innocent, then justice must be done, as well as seen to be done. They must be publicly vindicated and their persecutors condemned.<sup>26</sup>

Kelley (377) and Thomas (129-131) find similarities between their prayer and the psalms of individual<sup>27</sup> lament.<sup>28</sup> The psalmist frequently cries out for deliverance from ungodly enemies plotting against him (e.g., Ps 7, 10, 83, 94), while he sees himself as identifying with the “poor and needy... the humble,” and “oppressed” (Kelley, 378). Their powerlessness, in contrast with powerful opponents, is offset by God’s ability to right wrongs and bring justice and righteousness. Throughout the Scriptures God is particularly concerned with the plight of the poor, suffering and oppressed. Their cries expressed in the imprecatory Psalms cannot be ignored, even though they are difficult for Christians to understand. They appear filled with hatred and vengeance expressed in vivid metaphors, but the value of their verbalising their “perplexed complaint”(s) (Filson, 23) lies in their being able to honestly acknowledge their true emotions to God. By leaving vengeance in God’s hands, they abdicated their right to violent retribution (Kelley, 380) on their enemies who were also considered as enemies of God.

<sup>24</sup> ἐκδικεῖς means to take vengeance for something or punish something (Arndt & Gingrich, 238).

<sup>25</sup> The writer uses this phrase to refer to those who rebel against God (Ladd, 105) and are enemies of his people.

<sup>26</sup> Jesus’ parable in Luke 18:7,8 has a similar theme of prayer, that God will “grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night” but acknowledges that those praying may feel some delay.

<sup>27</sup> These deal with personal distress and suffering, not that of the complainant’s community. The language is usually figurative and more general than specific.

<sup>28</sup>The genre of lament includes some, but not necessarily all, of the following elements: (1) address, with an introductory cry for help and of turning to God; (2) lament, involving three subjects; namely, God, the sufferer, and the sufferer’s foes; (3) confession of trust ... in the Lord; (4) petition for God to take whatever action the situation may demand; (5) declaration of assurance of being heard; and (6) vow of praise. (Westermann as cited in Kelley 377)

The martyr/witnesses do not tell God what to do or how to answer their prayer. They cry, “*How long*” which is a familiar phrase from the Psalms<sup>29</sup> where the righteous frequently suffer while the wicked prosper. Even if there appears an inordinate length of time between evil acts and their punishment, God knows and will bring justice. The martyrs may question God’s timing, but they do not doubt that he will act. He promises that judgement will fall when the full number of those to be killed “*would be complete*” (6:11).

The writer repeatedly emphasizes the qualities of truth and justice in the nature of the Almighty. It will be “*a little longer*” but his righteous, longsuffering nature will reach its limit and judgement will inevitably fall. The prayers of the martyr/witnesses are answered in full when the time is right. This is achieved in 16:5 when those who “*have shed the blood of your saints and prophets*” receive the justice they deserve; in 18:20 when saints apostles and prophets are called to rejoice that “*God has given judgement for you against her [Babylon, the great whore]*”; and in 19:1,2 the “*great multitude in heaven*” loudly proclaim “*Salvation and glory and power to our God, for his judgements are true and just; ... he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.*”

However the prayers of the witnesses do not just focus on vengeance because the overall message of the book, according to Bauckham is that God has so planned that through the witness of the righteous in their suffering “at the hands of the unrighteous, God will win the unrighteous to righteousness” (266). He continues that “the distinctive message of Revelation requires that” their prayers also include “prayer for the conversion of the inhabitants of the earth.” While not totally convincing, he argues from the silence of 5:8 concerning the content of the prayers, to conclude that it is within the spirit of the message of the book, since it is the martyrs who sing the “new song” (5:9,10; 14:3) about the Lamb which in 15:3,4 declares, “All nations will come and worship before you” (266).

### Implications for today

It appears then that the intention of the writer of the book of Revelation is to enable faithful, persecuted believers to see life from God’s perspective (Witherington, 142) and to be led to worship him as Sovereign Lord. Claudel likens reading the book to walking through a cathedral where one is “led to fall on one’s knees in awe and wonder and worship God” (as cited in Witherington, 142). The focus is on God as the one with ultimate control. Whatever difficulties, suffering, pain, and even death, believers face, the images in this book bring hope in God to whom all earthly powers and authorities will finally submit. They enable readers to see God’s

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<sup>29</sup> Ps 6:3; 13:1f; 74:10; 79:5 etc

transformative power in the lives of his people and provide encouragement that he will use faithful witness and prevailing prayer to usher in his glorious kingdom.

It is “not the request of the Church which impels God to righteousness and gives him his grace, but God’s will is in his own hands, and he accomplishes his work as he has written it in his book.” (Schlatter as cited in Beasley-Murray, 151). God’s people need not fear to come to him at all times with boldness (Heb 4:16), confident in the knowledge that he delights to answer all those who pray for his will to be done. All heaven unites to help their prayers ascend to where they are heard and make a difference. Prayer in turn enables believers to know and understand God’s will better and to trust contentedly that all things will work together for good (Witherington, 142).

The ‘other’ angel who offered the prayers on the golden altar subsequently used coals from the altar, to throw to earth announcing the beginnings of judgement (8:5). The ushering in of the kingdom is in some way introduced by the prayers of God’s people. Torrance sums up “More powerful than anything else, is the power of prayer set ablaze by the fire of God and cast upon earth (as cited in Morris, 121).

These faithful martyr/witnesses can be assured that God hears their cry. Nothing escapes his knowledge. In the first century “massive engines of persecution and scorn were ranged against” Christians across the empire (Petersen, 87) but with no earthly power or influence, faithful bands of believers prayed and in spite of their victimization and innocent suffering God did not forget them, and his kingdom on earth continued to grow. As they cried out, “How long?”, many innocent sufferers cry to God in their pain, persecution or death throes wondering what he is doing and when he is going to act. He can handle humanity’s questions, perplexity and despair. The righteous whose sufferings are voiced here and in the Psalms give words to modern day sufferers who also have difficulty understanding the ways of God.

For those who suffer and cry out to God the act of prayer itself, also becomes a means of healing, with God changing the pray-er. “Prayer orients us to God’s design.” (Petersen, 95). Prayer allows the sufferer to express heart and mind to God. “Prayer is the means by which the people bring their concerns and pleas before God but prayer does not force God or put God under any obligation. God is still sovereign” (Reddish, 170). “The interaction between the sovereignty of God and the prayers of the saints is part of the ultimate mystery of existence. Faith is called upon to take both seriously” (Schlatter as cited in Beasley-Murray, 151).

Paul’s exhortation in Romans 12:20 urges believers to demonstrate practical kindness to enemies. And the words of Christ concerning forgiving enemies are often quoted when considering what should be the attitude towards oppressors or those who persecute the faithful. But it can be easy

for armchair Christians to theorize about rights and wrongs when they are not the ones suffering. The ability to offer genuine forgiveness when one has suffered life-destroying abuse is difficult, almost impossible without the experience of God's grace and forgiveness (Col 3:13) and the divine enabling of his Holy Spirit. Those observing innocent suffering, but not actually involved, may find consolation in praying for justice for the oppressed (Isa. 1:17) and for righteousness to prevail (Amos 5:24). But the dilemma for all Christians is, can it ever be right to call down God's vengeful judgement on those who are perpetrators of evil, oppression, persecution and even martyrdom against the innocent?

Such sentiments expressed by the martyr/witnesses under the altar are also common in the psalms which call down the wrath of God on the psalmist's enemies. Their attitude in prayer is not condemned, but is it in line with God's will? While there is a place for righteous anger at sin and godly abhorrence of evil (Eph 4:26), humans will never understand the full picture nor be able to fully discern what is justifiable. Vengeance and vindication must always be left in God's hands. To surrender desire for retaliation, is liberating for sufferers and enables them to freely move on and rebuild their lives. He *will* vindicate his name. His judgement or retribution may not be immediate or even in the lifetime of the sufferers, but it *will* come in response to their spoken and unspoken prayers (Rom 8:26).

Day believes that innocent sufferers "are to pray in two directions: conversion or destruction" (35), i.e., that persecutors will repent and acknowledge God's sovereignty or that God's righteous judgement will be poured out on them. (Either way God's people will be delivered.) However believers may find both concepts are difficult to pray. Day allows that imprecatory prayers are only justified if five conditions are fulfilled (33). (1) He warns that the situation should not involve minor hurt, but one of "extreme enmity" where perpetrators are "guilty of gross oppression and injustice" and "the most horrible abuse"; (2) Pray-ers must have exercised "persistent love" at all times towards their enemies; (3) There be no attitude of revenge in their hearts, but that all be left to God's justice alone; (4) The oppressed should appeal to God's promises that he will act in vindication of his name; (5) There are many Scriptural examples of people whose imprecatory prayers and cursing of God's enemies are part of the experience of the faithful.

The churches receiving this message and believers today should anticipate that persecution will continue and intensify. There will be more suffering and more martyrs. The writer wants to warn and prepare us for that, and to understand that suffering will never be wasted. It is "a necessary part of God's plan for conquering evil" (Reddish, 132). The death of Christ brought victory over sin and death. The witness of his people, even if it involves the ultimate sacrifice, will contribute to that

victory. God's people everywhere are invited to become part of that battle, joining their prayers of intercession with an innumerable gathering of the faithful to hasten the coming of their Lord.

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