

Our testimony for God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev Allan Spencer

[0 : 00] Could we for a time return to the chapter which we read in John's Revelation, chapter 6, and particularly the three verses from verse 9 to 11, covering the fifth seal.

When he opened the fifth seal, 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.

They called out in a loud voice, How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?

Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers, who were to be killed as they had been, was completed.

The church of the New Testament, the church born in the early days of the New Testament, was not always a church of peace and victory.

[1 : 07] From the beginning there were two strands running parallel. It was the church of the evangelists, but it was also the church of the martyrs.

And some of the greatest evangelists in the church were also known as the finest martyrs of the church. Paul, who took the gospel to the center of the empire, and possibly later to the very edge of the known world, was ultimately beheaded in Rome.

And one of the finest sermons we have in the New Testament, was preached by the martyr Stephen, as he stood before those who were lifting stones to kill him.

If you count up the numbers of the chapters of the book of Acts, you'll see that at least a quarter of the book is taken up with the story of Paul's imprisonment, and his transportation to Rome.

Even as he was doing his best work, some of his most productive work on the mission field, Paul could also write that he was being poured out like a drink offering.

[2 : 21] That his life was worth nothing to him. And that he faced death every day. If you look to the other epistles of the New Testament, you see exactly the same thing.

Don't be surprised. Don't think it's strange, Peter says, that you suffer, as though some strange thing was happening to you.

But rejoice, to the extent that you partake, that you share in Christ's sufferings. The thrust is always the same.

Stand fast. Hang on to your faith. Remember what's waiting to those who persevere. Don't, whatever you do, give in to persecution, even when everyone else seems to be yielding.

So the optimistic view of the church, as the victor, transforming society, by the spread of the gospel. So that the knowledge of the Lord would cover the earth like the waters of the sea.

[3 : 29] That was the prophetic vision. Ian Murray has published his Banner of Truth book, a fascinating book, where he talks about the Puritan hope. That was it.

That there would be a spread of the gospel, universal. That there would be a vast multitude, who would be united in praising and serving God.

But that was only half the story. There was also another view of the church. What I might call an eastern view of the church, as a persecuted minority.

Scorned by the people, scorned by the rulers, and surviving only by the skin of its teeth, in a hostile world. This was the church that was founded on the blood of the martyrs.

And instead of being concerned with victory, it was suffering that was their preoccupation. The catacombs of Rome, rather than the palace.

[4 : 31] And we might call it the eastern view, because if we look eastwards today, to Eastern Europe and to the Middle East, we see that it's there that the church is suffering, and persecuted in a particularly graphic and outward way, from communism and from Islam.

A time is coming, that whoever kills you, will think that he offers God service.
Now, Pat Moss, the island on which John received his revelation, was a dry and a very unfriendly island.

I don't suppose it figures very highly in the holiday brochures even today. It was a natural prison, surrounded by the sea, very dry, very unproductive.

The Roman emperors at this time, had been grinding the faces of the believers. And the church knew what it was to suffer, regularly, to the point of death.

[5 : 36] And this suffering, in itself, was a threat to the church, because it threatened to destabilize the church. Some of the church communities, were slowly giving in to this persecution, under pressure.

Ephesus, we read, had lost their first love. Laodicea was lukewarm. Pergamos was already compromising with untruth.

And Sardis was spiritually dead. All the seven churches, addressed by John there, all the seven churches were either slipping away, or they were under great pressure.

Now, why was all this happening? In some senses, to the believers, it was an utter mystery, because they trusted in Jesus Christ, who'd been preached to them, as the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

The one who could not be defeated. The one whose kingdom, and whose reign, was eternal, and mighty, and everlasting. And yet, they were such a crushed minority, helpless, and despised, seemingly.

[6 : 47] Losing members every day, to the sword, or, to persecution. This theology of power, which they'd been taught, which they'd learnt, didn't seem to be working out, in practice to them.

How could such intense, persecution and suffering, be part of a church, which was already weak, on earth? Now, John's task, in Revelation, the Lord's task, in giving him the Revelation, was to butter us, this fading faith.

to show that, this, to put this suffering, in its proper perspective. And the message, was very simple. Jesus Christ, is still, governor of the world.

Jesus Christ, does hold the destiny, of all men, in his hands. Only the lamb, which was slain, is fit to, unravel the seals, from the scroll.

And he will, call everyone, to account, in the end. As he opens, these seals, the seven of them, one by one, so the punishments, pour out, these four horses, of the apocalypse, first of all.

[8 : 01] Which speak, in turn, of conquest, of empire building, if you like. Of war, of famine, and dearth, on the land.

And death. The common experiences, of all men, and if we listen, to the news, we seem to see, the same story, every night, of war, and famine, and mighty men, and death.

These four, horsemen, still ride across, our TV screens, nightly, from Geneva, and from Afghanistan, and Colombia, and Ethiopia, and many other places. But there's a change, when we come, to the fifth seal here.

The scene is heaven, not earth. And the subject, changes to, the fate, or the lot, of the church. Not men, as a whole. While the empire, of men, has been pursuing, its course, through blood, and death.

The church, instead, has been following, its Lord. Following the lamb, which was slain. And both, these courses, which are running parallel, are very much, part of the divine purpose.

[9 : 15] And both, are very much, controlled, by the will of God. What John, is trying to teach, the church here, is that their suffering, is part of the will of God.

That it's not extraneous, to it. It's not something different. It's not something, even which is incidental, to it. But it's very much, part of the will of God, for the church. And that God alone, being master of the situation, will determine, when that persecution, will end.

And only he, will determine that time. And so I want to look, briefly, at these two, main aspects. The martyrdom, of the church.

The church, as a suffering church, first of all. And then finally, to the resolution, of the matter. The judgment, of Christ. One of the, repeated emphasis, of the New Testament, is that, it's the very nature, of the church, to be a martyr people.

We must, and there's a force, behind that, we must, take up our cross, and follow the master. The world, hated him, and so it will continue, to hate his body, on earth.

[10 : 32] The world, hasn't changed so much, in its spiritual character, during 2000 years. It's still hostile, to God, and it's still hostile, to his people.

And it shows, that hostility, in putting them, to death, in slaying, those who have received, the word of God. They're slain, because of, the word of God.

And they're slain, because of, again, the testimony, that they had, maintained. This testimony, which they'd held, that they'd held on to.

You've got to, pay close attention, to the words here. These saints, were the prophets, who'd received, the word of God. But they hadn't, only received it.

They were living, proofs of it. They were living, witnesses. And never more so, than by their deaths. You know, the word martyr, originally, didn't mean, one who was slain.

[11 : 35] The word here, for slain, is not martyr. Martyr, meant originally, a witness. The word martyr, is translated here, as testimony, instead.

But as time went on, the two things, slid together. The two ideas, overlapped, so that a man, who was holding on, to this word of life, was a man, who was also, losing his life, in persecution.

And was, the holding on, of the truth, more and more, resulted in suffering, and death, for the church. The key thing, is that these saints, held on to this testimony, and carried it with them, tightly clasped, to their bosom, through martyrdom, and into glory.

By hanging on, to the word of God, with such a grip, they inevitably, brought, suffering, onto their heads. If they held this truth, for a while perhaps, and then let it go, the suffering, might have vanished too.

But so, would their testimony, have vanished. The choice, was simple. Would they rather, have the word of God, or would they rather, have their own safety? Would they save, their lives, and then ultimately, lose them?

[12 : 58] Or would they, lose their life, in order to save it? In the end, and this is the point, that John is pointing out, to them here. That their testimony, and their suffering, are not separate things.

That their suffering, is not incidental, to their testimony. That their testimony, is their martyrdom.

And their martyrdom, is their testimony. And if the devil, is not trying, to wrest, the truth from us, by suffering.

Then we must, ourselves wonder, whether we are, holding on to the truth, as firmly, as we might be. The litmus test, of the degree, to which we hold, the truth, is the degree, to which we are, prepared to suffer, for it.

And this was, the acute danger, of a compromising church, like Pergamos. Which was proud, of its past. Which did not, deny the faith, even in the days, when faithful Antipas, was put to death.

Which was a martyr church, but now it was compromising. Perhaps because, of its pride, in its history. When you are given, such a treasure, as the word of God.

[14 : 16] Then we must, hold on to it, when we are under attack. Otherwise, it is meaningless. And it is then, particularly, that we should not, give up our love to God, and our love, to the brethren.

When we are under pressure. But also, all through this suffering, the church had to learn, why it was suffering.

What was it suffering for? The church was suffering, for the unsaved. The church was suffering, for the sake of the unbelievers.

To give them time. That's our service, to the church, which isn't yet visible. A church, which isn't yet visible, because it hasn't been brought in.

For a time to suffer. For it. To give it time, so that it might be brought in. Remember the parable of the tares. The good seed, sown among the tares.

[15 : 16] The harvest would not be, until the end of the age. Perfect justice, had to be held in check, for a while. So that the full, number of the elect, might be gathered in.

But meantime, the tares thrive. And they threaten, to choke the good seed. Many years ago now, when I was a, when I was a clerk, in the post office, in Lancashire.

Before I was a believer, I remember, there was a Christian clerk, on the counter there. Only one, amongst about a dozen of us. And he was much maligned. From myself, and from my friends particularly.

We accused him, of being a hypocrite, and many other kinds of things. The usual stuff. And how, we deserve, there and then, to be punished, for what we were saying.

And yet, God waited. And that Christian clerk, just had to take it, with a smile. For our sake. And I'm not even sure, that if he knows, since that, I've been converted.

[16:22] It was for my sake, that he held back. That he suffered, for me, in waiting, until God's elect, should be brought in. That's the necessary, suffering, for the saints.

For the sake of, the unbelievers. And not only because of them. Not only of their hands. But still on the theme, of suffering, we mustn't imagine that, perhaps we're thinking, the majority of us, are excluded, from this passage.

That it seems, far fetched, to extreme, because it's talking, of death, and martyrdom. And therefore, as we are not literally, asked to die, perhaps it doesn't, mean anything to us. The number slain, in Scotland, in recent years, for the faith, must be comparatively, small.

But there is, no particular, merit in, in death, in martyrdom, for its own sake. Christ said, that we must, take up our cross. The cross, which was the emblem, of death.

But we had to take up, that cross, daily. Paul said, that he died, daily. And he said, he always carried about, in his body, the death, of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[17:38] He was hard pressed, he was perplexed, he was persecuted, and struck down. He said, he was always being, delivered to death, to martyrdom, for Christ's sake.

So that his martyrdom, wasn't confined, just to the hour, of his own death, of the axe blow, in Rome. The believers, were to be, living sacrifices, constantly being, put to death.

And John here, mentions the slain, under the altar, just because that's, the particular, extreme example, of what believers, should be doing, every day. The logical end, of all our lives, dying.

A martyrdom, of many little cuts. You see, the problem of martyrdom, was not a problem, for the souls, under the altar. It was not a problem, for those who had, already died.

It was a problem, for the dying, for the church, that was still, struggling. They wanted guidance, they wanted support, they wanted building up, in their faith. And I believe, that every believer, is constantly, faced, day by day, with a choice, of martyrdom.

[18:54] Whether he prefers, the word, or the world. I've always been, uneasy by the view, that Christ, only demands, somehow, a willingness, for us to die.

As if we can go on, enjoying life's pleasures. And all will be well, as long as we have, this thought somewhere, tucked away, at the back of our mind, where we say, oh yes, I would be willing, to die, if it came to that.

If the situation, were so severe, I would be willing, to lay down my life, but in the meantime, now that claim, sounds very hollow. I believe, I believe rather, that Christ, is facing us, constantly, with, these choices, of martyrdom.

They may seem, petty, compared to, burning at the stake, as the many, of the reformers, or the cross. But if we're not, going to be faithful, in the little things, then how can we, be faithful, in the large ones?

If we find it hard, to take, one less biscuit, with our tea, how are we going, to cope with, real fasting, and hunger, and starvation?

[20:04] If we can't cope, with one less cushion, on the chair, then how are we going, to cope with, the dungeon floor, and with chains, and with shackles? It's only a figure, of speech, but I'm bringing out, the principle, that these lesser things, are training, for martyrdom.

And if we can't, survive the lesser, how are we going, to survive, the greater? What terrifies me, is that, I seem to be, so willing, to undergo, the larger suffering, and so, personally, unwilling, to undergo, the minor irritations, the little martyrdoms.

I read of a nun, once, who went into, a monastery, and she thought, she'd given up, an interest in life, that she'd sacrificed, everything, family, and friends, and life, and so on, enjoyment, and pleasure, for the sake of the Lord.

But she was, particularly fond, of a little corner, of a garden, in the monastery. And, she, she realized, how difficult, it would be, for her to give up, just that little, sunny corner, of the garden, in the monastery.

For the sake, of the Lord. If we're not faithful, in the little things, then how can we be faithful, in the big? It's these little comforts, which are so precious to us, and which we're so loath, to relinquish.

[21:37] In our own lives, martyrdom, may mean, putting the word of God, into the choice, of our career. It may be, a block to promotion, in our career.

It may mean, putting the word of God, into our families. And unbelieving relatives, can be the most hurtful, and the most probing, of all unbelievers.

It means, putting the word of God, into the street, in which we live. This is our martyrdom, our testimony, for the word. Even in so far, as the church, is a worldly organization, which it is, partially. It may mean, even bringing the word of God, into the church. And all this, because being a Christian, is being unlike, other men.

We put in, we bring in, the word of God. And the result is, that they put us, out of the synagogues. It may mean, losing our lifelong friends.

[22 : 42] Being laughed at, at work, or at school, in the school yard, or in the staff room. Being ostracized, by people. Being sneered at, behind a hand, or what's even worse sometimes, that ominous, silence, when you come into the room.

It may mean, standing firm, against fashionable vices. And because you stand firm, against them, you're branded, as a bigot. Or as a narrow-minded person.

Or as an old-fashioned person. Or as somebody, who's unloving. You remember, the rich, young ruler, who had kept the law, from his youth, who was such a pious man.

And yet, he wouldn't suffer, for the Lord. He wouldn't put, that word of God, that testimony, into his bank account. And so, he gave away his life, for his money.

He thought, that the law, and suffering, could be kept, separate. When indeed, they're so closely, bound up.

[23 : 46] All a man has, he'll give, for his life. But no, for the believer, he would give all he has, including his life. And he gives his life, every day.

And I think, that in a, in a post-Christian society, the choices are becoming, more stark, every day. There may be, relatively minor things, like switching off, a television program, because you hear blasphemy.

But then, most modern films, and many modern novels, are unwatchable, and unreadable, to the Christian. Does that mean, that the Christian, then in his martyrdom, has to sort of, cut himself off, from the culture, of his nation, and from a language, as rich as English?

When alcohol, becomes the, basis, and the, and the lubricant, of most socializing, does that mean, that the, that the Christian martyr, has to, give up, socializing, with unbelievers, recreation, with unbelievers?

If present legislation, on the Sabbath, goes through Parliament, and work practices, carry on in industry, as they have been doing, that means now, that Christians, will be excluded, from the retail trade, just as they've been excluded, so far, from the catering trade, so often, and from the transport industry, all these growth industries, in a time of, high unemployment.

[25 : 13] The rich Christian, can organize, his own life, his own way, but the poor Christian, can't. And there will be more, poor Christians, if jobs get harder to get.

Long ago, in New Testament times, the Christians, were the slaves. Very much as they are, in Eastern Europe today, the lowest band of society. And perhaps, as a martyr church, we shall return, sooner than we think, to the day, when the poorest classes, the untouchables, are the Christians. Christians. I only ask the question, but in a post-Christian country, how long can it be, that a martyr church, will continue to be a rich, middle class church, if it takes the word of God, and holds on to it. If it takes the word of God, into every aspect, of life. And through, every department of life. And let's also be taught, from the passage, what a privilege it is, to suffer for Christ.

Not only to suffer for him, but to suffer with him. What Paul calls, in a beautiful phrase, the fellowship, of his sufferings.

[26 : 35] There can be very few ties, I think, which bind people together, more than the tie, of having suffered, together. And the privilege, is that we can, grow closer to Christ.

We can become, one with him, if, and only if, we suffer, with him. It has been, granted to us, to suffer.

Not as a sign, of God's disfavour. But just of the opposite. The suffering, is a sign, of God's favour. And he shows, his favour to us, by allowing us, to come closer, to him.

It allows us, also this suffering, to come closer, to other believers. They're no longer, anonymous people, we see on a Sunday morning, but they're our fellow, fellow sufferers.

The passage here, describes them as, fellow servants, and brothers. And these, are brothers to the souls, under the altar. Most of the men, they would never have met, on earth, in the flesh.

[27 : 43] Total strangers, yet brothers, and fellow sufferers. Because they died, for this testimony. Do our hearts, not glow, when we hear of, brothers overseas, in very much more, difficult straits, than ourselves, who are suffering, and dying, for the same Lord, which we worship.

It is a privilege, to suffer, for Christ. And that's why, the saints here, were given white robes, as a token of that, and as a token, of their victory.

For if we suffer, with him, shall we not also, reign with him? The apostles, said a very strange thing, after they'd been scourged, by the Sanhedrin.

They said, they were rejoicing, because they were, counted worthy, of suffering, shame, for his name. They had been, counted worthy, to suffer.

Now there are, lots of questions, in the church, as of whether, we are worthy, to come forward, to the Lord's table. But do we ever, question whether, we are worthy, rather, to suffer?

[29 : 04] It's very much more, to the point, in some ways, and very pertinent, in a church, which seems to be, suffering so little, today. Why are we not, worthy to suffer?

Is it because, the Lord knows, that we're not able, to bear it? Is it because, the Lord knows, we wouldn't last, very long, if we were tested, to the point, of the shedding of blood?

Are we worthy, to suffer, for his name? If Christ is worth, living for, then he's worth, dying for.

And if we do suffer, do we count it, as they did, an honour, to be dishonoured? Do we count it, a privilege, to be disgraced?

Or do we want, perhaps, to go off in the huff, or to withdraw, into our shell? Now the last point, the resolution, of the problem.

[30 : 14] Look at the content, of the cry, of these believers. How long, O Lord, until you judge, and avenge our blood, on those, who dwell on earth?

The souls, under the altar, serve, night and day, in the temple, John tells us, in the next chapter. They're preoccupied, with the glory, of God.

And yet, at the same time, they can't forget, their own, sufferings on earth. They still have, acute memories, of the anguish, they've endured. And they look, for that future judgment, with a keen anticipation.

How long, O Lord? How long? As souls, parted from their bodies, they cry out, for their martyred flesh. They're unclothed.

Paul calls them, naked souls. Resting, until the justice is done. And their body, and their soul, are brought together again. Now, many think of vengeance, as an Old Testament concept, which doesn't have any place, in the new at all.

[31 : 25] But the saints here, are crying out, for vengeance, with a loud voice. They have an urgent need, for satisfaction.

They want to see, their persecutors judged, and their own deaths avenged. Their blood cries out, as did the blood of Abel. And in the meantime, they cannot rest.

The thief on the cross, was in paradise, with Christ. But, the thought still disturbs, his rest in paradise. That God's glory, is not yet complete.

You see, it's not a personal revenge, it's not a bitter spirit, that's troubling, these saints. But, it's the fact, that their death, was an insult, to God, whose word, they'd held.

The word, for Lord, here, is very interesting. It's the same word, as a despot. Somebody, who's a powerful, ruler. And what the persecutors, had done, in slaying the saints, was a challenge, to this ruler's authority.

[32 : 36] How can a king rule, if his subjects, are treated, like this? It wouldn't be mercy, to let them alone, it would be downright, dereliction of duty.

And the king, wouldn't be a king, anymore. Our catechism tells us, a well-known thing, the glory of God, is the chief end of man.

Not his own glory, not the welfare of man. And while the saints die, then that glory of God, is unrecognized. So there has to soon, come a time, when this position, when his position, will be vindicated.

When Christ will put, all rule, and power, and authority, underneath his feet, and deliver the kingdom, to God the Father. There's no element, of personal revenge here.

In fact, by leaving vengeance, to God, personal revenge, is left out. Beloved, don't avenge yourselves, Paul says, in Romans 12.

[33 : 42] It is written, vengeance is mine, says the Lord, and I will repay. This striking back, this vengeance, this revenge, personally, is to be resisted, in patience.

You must wait upon God, be patient. That's why patience, is mentioned so often, in this book of Revelation. more than in any other book, in the New Testament. Patience, patience.

Not waiting for no justice, but waiting, only for the perfect justice, of God. And in the meantime, the law of patience, is the rule.

when Jesus was asked, who was the neighbor, he showed that even a hated Samaritan, could be a good neighbor. But that doesn't exclude, a day of vengeance to come.

A day will come, when the law of heaven, will dictate, that the reprobate, is no longer, our neighbor. When the good Samaritan, must pass by, on the other side.

[34 : 48] So that Lazarus, is not even able to, so much as dip, the tip of his finger, in water, to cool, the tongue, of him, who is in anguish, in the flame.

Not to take pleasure, but to pass him by, whom God has commanded, depart from me, thou cursed. Jesus taught his disciples, to pray often, thy kingdom come.

And the words, of the Lord's prayer, fall off our lips, so easily. But in essence, they're no really different, from the cry of the saints, under the altar, avenge our blood, on those who live, on the earth.

For God's kingdom, will bring in, an awful judgment. And the saints, are praying for it. They long for it, nonetheless.

When we feel, we've been treated, unfairly. When we've been handled, roughly, or harshly. Then we must rest, a little while longer.

[35 : 59] And pray for God's will, to be done, on earth. As it is in heaven. So, these are solemn things, but the saints, prayed with a loud voice.

And the wonderful answer, of God to their prayer, was that his kingdom, did come nearer, through their prayers. If you read, the seals, which follow, the sixth seal, and the seventh seal.

You see, that they follow, immediately. The great day, of his wrath, has come. And who is able, to stand. Who can stand. Through their prayers, they help to bring in, the last judgment.

And when, when that judgment comes, it's not only Christ, who reigns. But these very souls. The souls, of those, who were beheaded, for their testimony, to Christ.

And for the word of God. They are given, thrones, and judgment, by Christ. And like the 70 elders, appointed by Moses, we shall share, in the judgment, and the ruling, of God's Israel.

[37 : 10] That's a wonderful promise. Now in a few minutes, perhaps we'll, sing from Psalm, 137. And sometimes, we're very reluctant, to sing, the last verse, of the Psalm.

Happy shall they be, thy tender little ones, to dash against the stone. Other verses, like Psalm 55, let death, seize upon them.

And let them, go down to hell. These Psalms, of cursing, these particular verses, from these, imprecatory Psalms, they send a shudder, down our spine.

Yet we do, have a right, to sing them. When we're, purged of a sense, of personal hatred, and concerned, only to see, God's glory, in its fullness.

The Psalms, were given, for every situation, that the church, was likely to face. Including, great suffering. Including, great persecution. Including, martyrdom, unto death.

[38 : 16] And perhaps, if we as a church, today, were suffering, these circumstances too, we would understand, these verses, better than we do. But we still have, a duty, and a right, to sing them.

They're a reminder, to us, that this day, of the Lord, is soon to come. That Edom, and Babylon, who were mentioned, in the last verses, of Psalm 137, that Edom, and Babylon, are no more.

That the curse, did come upon them. As a sign, of the curse, which would come, on the world, of unbelievers. The suffering, of, those martyrs, who suffered, for their faith, may have been dreadful, and a great test, to the church.

But far, far more terrible, is the suffering, to come for those, who have not, witnessed, for him. Who have not, stood, as martyrs, as testimony, to that word of God, in suffering, and death.

And no one's, excluded from, that challenge. When we, sit at the table, tomorrow, at the Lord's table, worthy, to come forward, to partake, of the elements.

[39 : 39] Then are we, worthy, also, to suffer for him, on Monday, and Tuesday, and Wednesday, as we bring, the word of God, into, our lives.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.