

**In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen**

**The Martyrdom of John the Baptist (2021)**

**Who Avenges the Saints?**

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***“They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”” (Revelation 6:10, ESV)***

As the angel opened the fifth seal, St. John saw the souls of God’s people under the incense altar before the throne of God. These are the souls of those who had been martyred because of their witness to the Word of God. He hears their cry of vengeance against those who spilled their blood and put them to death. These souls did not avenge their own blood, nor did their Christian brothers, but now, in heaven, they are asking God to avenge them. To judge and punish those who had oppressed them and persecuted them and put them to death because of their love for Christ and their faithfulness to the Word of God. As did Abel’s, their blood cries out for retribution. But God says, ***“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”” (Romans 12:19, ESV)***

The cries of these souls and the Word of God rings familiar today as we listen to the Apostle Mark tells us about the beheading of John the Baptist. When we read the account of the Baptist’s murder by Herod, we cannot help but think how unfair, how gruesome, how callous his murderer was. Herod imprisoned the Baptist because he had admonished Herod for his adulterous affair with Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. Herod professed to being a Jew, so he understood the Ten Commandments, including the Sixth Commandment in which God commands His people not to commit adultery. Yet Herod, driven by his flesh rather than the Word of God, willingly engages in the sin of adultery. John the Baptist, being a prophet, a man called by God to proclaim God’s Word, had no choice but to call Herod out for his sinful action. To ignore this not only blatant sin, but a public sin, would have put John the Baptist on the same level as those Temple leaders who knew of Herod’s sin, yet ignored it. Failing to warn Herod of the consequence of his sin of adultery would have also put John the Baptist in a serious, negative position with God. It would have led to his condemnation, for John was God’s called watchman, and God says through the prophet Ezekiel, ***“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.” (Ezekiel 33:7–9, ESV)*** By calling Herod out for his act of adultery, John the Baptist was doing nothing more than what was required of him by God.

Oh, but you can be certain that Herod did not like being called out for his sinfulness, he did not like being labeled a sinner. So, he had John arrested and put into prison. Moreover, not only did Herod not like being labeled a sinner, but Herodias, his brother’s wife whom he had married, also did not take kindly to the label, and thus she wanted John the Baptist killed. But Herod feared harming the Baptist because he was so well liked by the people. But that same lust which drove him to take his brother’s wife, led him to take the life of John the Baptist.

When Herodias' daughter, Salome, danced for Herod at his birthday party, his lust for her led him to promise her anything she desired, and prompted by her mother, she desired the head of John the Baptist on a platter. In his drunken, lustful condition, Herod had backed himself into a corner, one from which he could not extract himself because as king his oath could not be undone. Thus, to save his pride, to assuage his adulterous wife, and to please the girl he lusted after, he had John the Baptist beheaded! Another prophet of God killed by his own people. A killing brought about because John the Baptist was a faithful preacher of God's Word, calling the world to repentance.

But is this not the way of life for a true Christian. Indeed, until the Last Day, the Body of Christ must suffer persecution. Following the Word of God, a Christian can become quite unpopular because of their faithfulness.

Christians who engage in missionary work in pagan lands face persecution. They are persecuted because they bring a message that is contrary to what pagans in those lands believe. Telling a worshipper of false or multiple gods that there is only one, true, Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, can result in rejection and life-threatening moments. But this is the risk so many are willing to accept in the advancement of the Gospel; persecution at the hands of those whom they are trying to help. Those who forfeit their lives in this effort are among ***“the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.”*** (Revelation 6:9, ESV)

The persecution of Christians is to be expected because the life of a Christian is life in the “church under the cross.” Life in the church is the struggle between error and truth, between tyranny and the spirit of Christ. When error or tyranny prevail, corruption befalls the church. The moment this happens, the church is still the church in one sense or another, but it is the church of its creators, men, it is no longer the church of the kingdom of Christ. In such churches the Antichrist creeps in and seats himself in Christ's seat. Within this church, the struggle of true believers continues to be a struggle for the “church,” a struggle from which Satan must once again be expelled. Thus, the struggle continues to preserve the church of which John the Baptist belonged, the church that cleaves to the Word of God in all its truth and purity, calling sinners to repentance while expelling the wicked from their midst.

Moreover, this struggle is by no means concerned only with pure doctrine. It is also concerned, to an equal degree, with worship and spirit. The kingdom of Christ cannot be falsified, but the church surely can. Those who give their lives to this continued struggle of preserving the church, keeping it in God's Word, teaching and preaching the Word in its truth and purity, administering the sacraments according to the commands of Christ, they, too, are among the slain souls under the altar of God.

The individual Christian also lives everyday “under the cross.” Their daily life is a struggle between the spirit and the flesh. The flesh and Satan are constantly harassing them, enticing them to sin, placing one temptation after the other before them. Often that temptation is the vicious response of others, both believers and unbelievers, whom the Christian, because of the clear Word of God, has been compelled to call to repentance, to recognize their sin as that which is contrary to the will and command of God, to recognize the ways of the world are not the ways of God.

Luther counts misfortune, persecution, tribulation, and every evil among the characteristic marks of the “holy Christian people” of the church. Thus, that which happens on earth becomes a battle for him. By means of the cross, God wants to make us similar to Christ, but the devil wants to make use of the cross to deprive us of faith in the Word of promise. So the devil, this mighty,

evil, and restless spirit brews misfortune for the child of God. However, he is defeated by God's gift of faith in the Word of promise. Suffering for the sake of the Gospel is the Christians cross, a cross that leads souls to be among the slain souls under the altar of God.

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, was filled with the Holy Spirit who, according to St. Mark, ***“appeared, baptizing in the wilderness . . . proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mark 1:4, ESV)*** Thus, he was a missionary, but not a missionary to foreign lands, but rather a missionary to his own people, to the lost sheep of Israel. His baptism was a means of grace with the power to grant remission of sin and the power to effect faith. He fulfilled his calling by proclaiming God's Word, both Law and Gospel. It was the Law that he proclaimed to Herod and the Law showed Herod his sin. Put off by his condemnation, Herod rebelled against the Law and arrested the prophet of God. John fulfilled his calling, as every man called by God into the office of the holy ministry is expected to do; even in the face of opposition, the man of God is duty bound to preach both Law and Gospel.

The fate of John the Baptist is all too common today. When someone is convicted of their sin by the preaching of the Law. They don't like it. They become angry, accusing the preacher of being unloving, accusing him of being unkind. How dare he, they say, call out my sin! How dare him, who does he think he is? Like Herod, they want to strike back, but they can't kill the preacher, literally, so let's kill him symbolically. Violating the Fourth Commandment, they begin a slander campaign. At every opportunity they denigrate him, his character, his ability, his teaching, his preaching, and everything else that the preacher does as their called and ordained servant. I can't order his beheading they think, but I can behead him symbolically. Thus, for simply doing what God has called him to do, the pastor suffers, he is crucified by his own people. But should this surprise anyone. Was not Christ's persecuted and killed by His own people? As an under-shepherd of Christ, the pastor should not be surprised when he experiences the same rejection as did His Lord. Such men are also among the slain souls of those under the altar of God.

When the Baptist called out Herod for his sin, he called him to repentance. This is also why pastors today call out sin, the pastor calls the sinner to repentance. The Law of God spoken by the pastor awakens the sinner to his sinful condition and reminds him he doesn't have the power to undo his sin. His sin can only be undone by the victorious work of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ upon the Altar of the Cross. It is His persecution, His suffering, His death at the hands of merciless murders that atoned for the sin of all men. His death gave access to the altar of God for all who were martyred defending the Gospel, proclaiming Christ's death as the atoning sacrifice which won the forgiveness of sins for all men.

As these slain souls await the Last Day, they continually pray for the souls of men on earth. In answer to their prayers, they are ***“given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.” (Revelation 6:11, ESV)*** This “white robe” symbolizes the salvation garment of Christ. The robe of righteousness with which they were covered in their Baptism. This robe reminds them that they have been cleansed of sin by the blood of the Lamb, therefore, they stand pure and holy, righteous before God, confident that their cries will be heard and answered.

So *Who Avenges the Saints*, those slain souls who ask, how long O Lord ***“before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:10, ESV)*** No one other than our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Until the Last Day, a day of which no one knows except the heavenly Father, the glorious role of the church is to follow her Lord, the Lamb of God who was slain to take away the sin of the world. For He is her deliverer. Therefore, the

church is to be a witness of her own martyrdom, for martyrdom is not simply the church's deliverance from the world, but the culmination of the church's witness to the world. The church gains her glory by completing her mission in martyrdom, glorifying the cross, the resurrection of her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and His exaltation at the right hand of the heavenly Father. *Who Avenges the Saints*, the One who makes them Saints, Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.