

When God Says, “Not Yet” Revelation 6:1-7:17

From beginning to end, the book of Revelation is about persecution. Its author, John, writes to churches under threat from both Jewish synagogue and Roman political powers. Some Christians have suffered confiscation of their property. A few martyrs have already died. No end is in sight.

So far, John has told these suffering churches that they must remain faithful to God, no matter how bad things get. Then he sketched a portrait of God and Christ, reigning from heaven. Putting these two themes together, the question naturally arises: “Given that God and Christ reign, how much longer must we suffer? When are they going to intervene on earth and obtain justice for us?” (6:10). Chapters 6-7 address that question, though its answer may not be entirely to their satisfaction, or to ours.

Day 1: Revelation 6:9-10 “How long, Sovereign Lord?”

The author and original readers of Revelation would realize that this is not the first time God’s people have asked him this particular question. So when they ask it afresh, it comes pre-loaded with associations.

Psalm 79 also asks, “How long, O Lord?” Among its links with Revelation: in both texts, vultures and beasts feed on human carcasses (Ps 79:2; cf. Rev 6:8; Rev 19:17,21), and the people of God cry out in the midst of their brutal suffering, “Avenge the outpoured blood of your servants!” (Ps 79:10). Zechariah 1 also asks, “Lord Almighty, how long?” It, too, has additional links with Revelation, with its vision of horses sent by God throughout the earth (Zech 1:8-11; cf. Zech 6:1-8; Rev 6:1-8). Notably, though, the historical contexts of Psalm 79 and Zechariah 1 differ significantly from Revelation: in both of the Old Testament texts, God is punishing his people for their sin, and their suffering is deserved; in Revelation 1, they suffer because they are faithful.

Given this fundamental difference, why does John recall this question and these texts for his readers? Immediately, as he quotes the question, he implies an answer: God will surely intervene in response to their pleas. After all, even when Israel had provoked God so severely that he caused the defeat of the nation in war, and forced the survivors into exile, even then he intervened to rescue his people once they had repented. How much more now can he be trusted to deliver his people, when their suffering is the result not of sin but of faithfulness! “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” “I avenged my people previously, even though they were

sinful,” comes the implicit reply. “I can certainly be trusted to avenge my faithful people who suffer now.”

Day 2: Revelation 6:11 “Wait a little longer, until more people die.”

Unlike in the Old Testament, God answers the question directly, and his answer is surprising, even startling. “How long, Sovereign Lord?” “Not yet,” comes the reply. Not only will there be some delay, worse yet, more must die before God intervenes! “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” (6:11).

Here is a disquieting affirmation of God’s sovereignty. The inquirers had appealed to God’s sovereignty for their deliverance. God affirms his sovereignty: the passive, “who were to be killed”, is a common way Scripture uses to refer to divine determination. God is not doing the killing, but he does control it: only those whom he has predetermined will die. At the same time, all whom he has predetermined must die, before he intervenes.

What are they – and we – to make of this? First, it does offer some consolation, though perhaps small. It may not promise us a peaceful life, followed by a peaceful death, but it does at least assure us that God is in control of whatever happens to us. Secondly, while we naturally long for more, this is all that God provided Christ, when the political and religious authorities conspired against him. Even at the cross, they managed to do only “what [God’s] power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:28). So, facing an answer from God that is not as reassuring as they would like, these believers recognize that Jesus walked this path before them, and for them. We, too, when we endure suffering and cry out for deliverance, yet God does not deliver us from our struggle, we remember this: Jesus walked this path before us, and so did his people in Revelation.

Day 3: Revelation 6:1-8 More of the answer: #1 God avenges temporally

In a literary curiosity, the first part of the answer to this question actually precedes the asking of the question. The question, “How long, Sovereign Lord...?” appears in verse 10. By then, God has already anticipated the question, and provide the first of his four-part answer. In providing the answer even before the question is asked, the author underscores that God is on it, even before anyone raises it as an issue.

The first answer: God avenges his people by bringing suffering on hostile nations in this age. He describes four forms of suffering: invasion (6:1-2), civil war (6:3-4), famine (6:5-6), and plague (6:7-8). To what actual

calamities is this text referring? Many contemporary interpreters and popular authors look for events in our day that fulfill these descriptions. But that is a curious place to begin. God is speaking – and John is writing – first of all, not to us but to the seven churches of ancient Turkey, described in Revelation 2-3. Moreover, he is describing the age which began with the resurrection of Christ and does not end until he returns. So cataclysms today in a country which persecutes the church could well be part of the long chain of events stretching as far back as the first-century, and as far forward as the time when Jesus returns. But it would be odd to suppose that this passage never applied to the people of God over the last twenty centuries, but only to us and our time.

Several disasters befell the Roman empire in the first century C.E., including devastating earthquakes (c.E. 60), a massive fire in Rome (c.E. 64), the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (c.E. 79), and recurring famines (with an especially virulent one in c.E. 92). Likely the text intends a general reference: God avenges his persecuted church, first of all, by afflicting oppressive countries with various sorts of calamity, such as invasion, civil war, famine and plague. When a political regime oppresses the church, and disasters befall, it is the hand of God which lies behind those calamities.

Day 4: Revelation 6:12-17 More of the answer: #2 God avenges eternally

Calamities which befall oppressive regimes are a foretaste of a greater vengeance, the great and final cataclysm which constitutes “the day of wrath”, when God executes full justice on all who oppose him and his people. The earth shudders; sun, moon and stars turn dark; the sky rolls up and the mountains fall down. All people, powerful and weak, rich and poor, tremble in the shadows, pleading for a quick death away from the presence of the fearsome God.

Often this text is presumed to apply exclusively to the coming end of the world. It may. But it – along with much of Revelation (and the apocalyptic discourses of Matthew 24-25 and Mark 13) – makes more sense with a dual reference. Apocalyptic language appears regularly in both Old and New Testaments to characterize the brutal devastation of total war. So even if this description refers ultimately to some end-of-the-world cosmological cataclysm, in the meantime it may also refer to any number of destructive conquests and violent regime changes in political systems that oppose Christ and his church. Either way, God assures the persecuted church that he will, in his time, avenge their suffering by destroying the oppressive regimes which persecute them.

Day 5: Revelation 7:1-8 More of the answer: #3 God strengthens his people. This passage employs a striking pun. Up to this point, 'seal' has referred to the breaking of wax seals that keep a document closed tight. Now 'seal' refers to an action of God by which he secures the destiny of his people. Previously, the opening of seals brought punishment on the persecutors, now sealing provides protection to God's people.

The sealing of the followers of Christ provides the third response of God to persecution: he punishes persecutors in this life; he judges them eternally; and, he also ensures the survival of his people through the challenges and catastrophes of life. God does not remove them from suffering, but his sealing ensures that their faith survives whatever comes. This is an important distinction. They will still suffer, but they will not succumb. For us who do not suffer persecution, there is still something to learn here, even in our easier lives. God's promise to us, no less than to them, is not a life of peace and prosperity, but a faith that can survive whatever life throws at us.

Day 6: Revelation 7:9-17 The final piece of the answer: #4 God brings his people safe home. Just as the punishment of the persecutors has two aspects – calamity in this age, and devastation at its end – so does God's intervention on behalf of his persecuted people. First he ensures their perseverance through persecution and calamity in this life. Then the vision opens the door of heaven, and John sees a vast, countless multitude, from every ethnicity and language group, singing the praises of Father and Son: "Salvation belongs to our God." There they enjoy eternal well-being in the presence of God.

So neither Jesus nor John offers his readers all that they likely wanted, certainly not all that we would want. Like us, they probably wanted to hear that God would intervene, that persecution would cease, that their reward would come immediately. Instead, Jesus warned that more would yet die, that pay back would begin through calamity now and culminate in devastation at some unspecified future, and that God would empower them to persevere now and would eventually take them home to paradise.

The expected consequence of these promises was that the Christians of Revelation would gather their courage, straighten their shoulders, and persevere in the face of whatever came their way, knowing that while the path may be difficult, it was the same path as Jesus trod, and would issue in the same honor for them as it had for him. While our lives are much easier than theirs, our promise is no less: God strengthens us to persevere in the face of adversity now, and will bring us home to himself at the end.