



How long is a question asked by believers on the earth and in heaven.
Asaph wrote...

Psalm 74:4-11:

Your foes roared in the place where you met with us; they set up their standards as signs. ⁵ They behaved like men wielding axes to cut through a thicket of trees. ⁶ They smashed all the carved paneling with their axes and hatchets. ⁷ They burned your sanctuary to the ground; they defiled the dwelling place of your Name. ⁸ They said in their hearts, "We will crush them completely!" They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land.

Psalm 74:4-11:

⁹ We are given no signs from God; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be. ¹⁰ How long will the enemy mock you, God? Will the foe revile your name forever? ¹¹ Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them!

The cry of Psalm 74 is a cry for God to protect the honor of his name; but also, to hold accountable those who had acted with violent savagery against his people.

The question "How long" is not one of doubt in God's integrity or of his commitment to act with justice.

The question is asked from the place of confidence in God's holiness and power. It is the heart cry of one who shares God's love for righteousness and who longs for the reign of darkness to end and for God to make all things righted, and all things new.

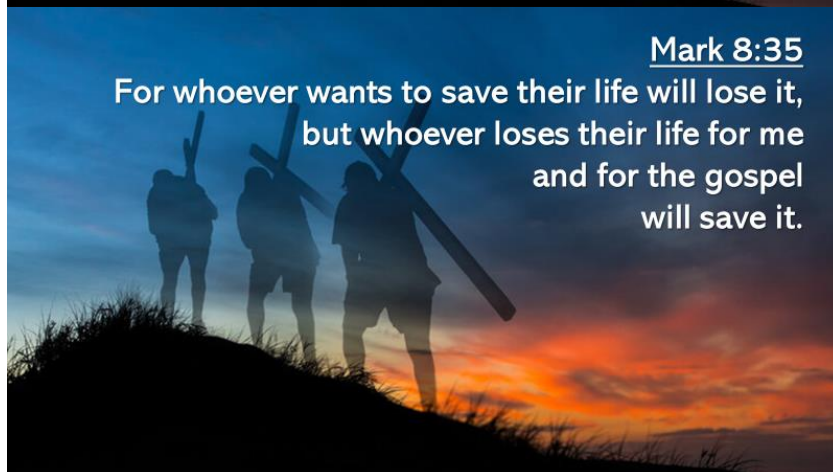
What John saw and heard as the fifth seal was opened points us to a theme which Jesus spoke of often; a reality that has been experienced by his church in every generation.

Jesus couldn't have been any clear when he said...



Mark 8:34

Whoever wants to be my disciple
must deny themselves and take up their cross
and follow me.



Mark 8:35

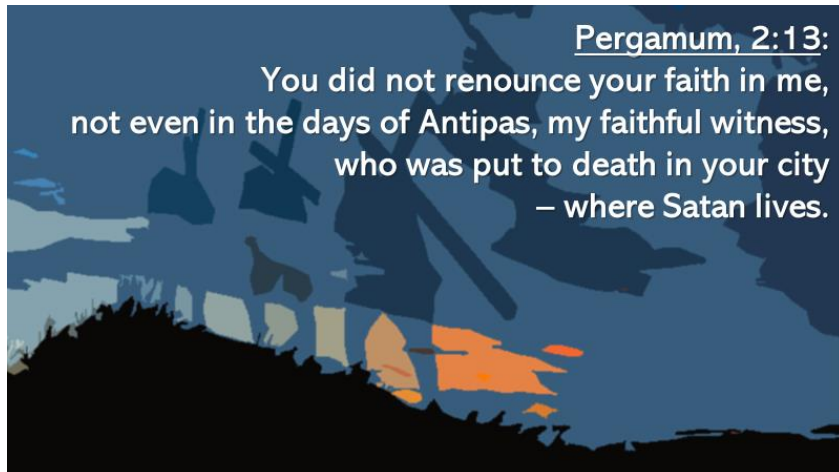
For whoever wants to save their life will lose it,
but whoever loses their life for me
and for the gospel
will save it.

What Jesus said in Mark 8 is in line with what he said to the seven churches of Asia.



Smyrna, 2:10:

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer...
Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give
you life as your victor's crown.



Those whom John saw had not died because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Without question, this is a challenging truth...but what Isaiah prophesied regarding the death of Jesus...



... applies also to those who believe in Jesus.

For the glory of God, sometimes it is his will for a believer, as was the case with Jesus.... to be slain; for their life to be taken.

This was the story of those whom John saw in Revelation six.

When Romans 8:35 asks the question – who shall separate us from the love of Christ – seven possible answers are suggested:

**Shall trouble or hardship or
persecution or famine or nakedness
or danger or sword?**

But rather than answering with a simple no, the Holy Spirit moved Paul in Romans 8:36 to quote from Psalm 44:22.

The context of this Psalm is important.

Psalm 44

Read v.1-8.

These were a people who loved God and who found great delight in fellowship with him and were deeply grateful for what he had done for them and through them.

Read v.17-18, 20-21.

These were a people who were loyal and faithful to God.

But look what came upon them.

Read v.9-16, 19, 22.

God permitted trouble to come into their lives – trouble that threatened, plundered, devoured and crushed.

For the sake of God, they faced death.

Why were these followers of God treated as sheep to be slaughtered?

Tom Wright provides insight as to why God chooses to allow his people to suffer and be martyred:

“The suffering of those in Psalm 44... had not come about because of their infidelity. It came despite the fact that they had been faithful. In Psalm 44, as in the ‘Servant’ passages of Isaiah, we find a deep truth – **God will save his people, not despite their sufferings, but through and even because of them.**”

“I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking
in regard to Christ’s afflictions...”

Colossian 1:24

The sufferings of God’s people are taken up into God’s purposes, not in order to add to the unique achievement of the Messiah, but in order to live it out in the world so that the immense love of Christ might be seen and extended further.”

Romans, Part One, p.161.

This is the confidence of the believer, in all circumstances...

Romans 8:38

**Neither death nor life,
neither angels or demons,
neither the present nor the future,
nor any powers,
neither height nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us
from the love of God.**

So, why then, in the perfection of heaven, in the presence of God, do these believers, whom John saw, ask, “How long...until...?”

Their suffering was over.

Those who had taken their lives could no longer harm them.

Let’s read verse 10 again.

Theirs was not a question regarding God's willingness or one which doubted the integrity of his person.

Theirs was a question of timing.

This is also a question of the angels.

In 500 BC, in the second year of King Darius' reign, the prophet Zechariah had a vision of heaven, where he saw and heard an angel of the Lord ask,

“LORD Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?”

Zechariah 1:12

Remember what Peter wrote in his first epistle wrote...

1 Peter 1:12

Even angels long to look into these things.

What things?

1 Peter 1:11

...the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.

1 Peter 1:12

Even angels long to look into these things.

Isn't that incredible?

The angels are fascinated with and having a burning desire to know the glories that are coming out of and because of the sufferings of the Messiah.

Those in heaven... the angels and those seen by John, ask the question 'how long,' because their passion is that God's will be done on the earth as it is in heaven.

The question of the martyrs was answered.

Read v.11.

The Lamb's answer to them was two-fold.

Each of them was given a white robe.

First of all, how does a disembodied person put on a robe?

John is using poetic language.

In the Bible a white robe represents both purity and victory.

From the perspective of purity.

When a person receives and believes in Jesus, his righteousness is credited to them.

From the moment of faith onward, and for the entire duration of a believer's life, the Holy Spirit is active to make them in practice what by faith God declared them to be.

And when a believer passes from this life to the next?

The work of sanctification is completed.

Great is the wisdom and the power of God.

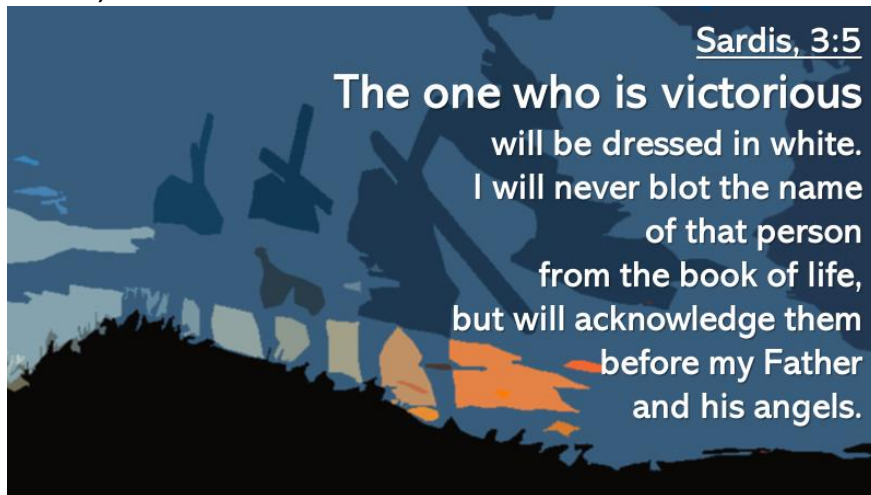
God will leave nothing undone; nothing will be overlooked; all injustice will be made right.

This is what the martyrs were assured of.

From the perspective of victory.

When these martyrs were slain for the sake of Jesus, their accusers and executioners may have stated in varying ways that they were not worthy to live.

But the Lamb who was slain vindicates them as he had promised the church in Sardis, 3:5...



They had fought the good fight; they had finished the race, they had kept the faith. See 2 Timothy 4:7

The martyrs are told to wait a little longer.

For what?

Until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, are killed just as they had been.

As with the things caused by the four horsemen, realities that define this present time, so is the killing of God's people.

A study was carried out by Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in 2001 by Barrett and Todd Johnson.

They published a list of more than 600 martyrdom situations over the course of history, estimating that more than...

70 million +

... Christians had been martyred over the last two millennia.

<https://archive.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/research/documents/2Countingmartyrsmethodology.pdf>

Christianity Today on January 13, 2021 published the report prepared by Open Doors.

Open Doors reports:

In 2020:

- Every day, 13 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith.
- Every day, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked.
- Every day, 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned, and another five are abducted.

Worldwide registered martyrdoms rose to 4761 in 2020.

Nine in 10 Christians killed for their faith were in Africa, the rest in Asia.

resilience

David Curry, president of Open Doors says,
You might think this report is all about oppression.
But it is really all about resilience.

The numbers of God's people who are suffering should mean the church is dying – that Christians are keeping quiet, losing their faith, and turning away from one another. But that's not what is happening.

Instead, in living color, we see the words of God recorded in the prophet Isaiah: I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Isaiah 43:19.

The message of the Lamb to the martyrs was not intended to strike paralyzing fear into the seven churches, nor into us.

In following the Lamb, many believers (tens of millions) have laid down their lives. This is how it is in this present time.

Persecution is to be expected when we take up our cross and follow Jesus.

When we commit our lives to Jesus we don't know the scope of all the things that will touch our lives because of our association with him.

But we know him.

And we would sooner lose our lives than lose him.

Our commitment to Jesus is in response to his commitment to us.

He gave his life for us.

Such love invokes in us wholehearted commitment.

We love him because he first loved us.

Jesus is our great treasure, he is our all-encompassing love.

Even if it were possible to offer us the wealth and power of the whole world, it is nothing compared to Jesus.

Of this we are certain...when we suffer and if we are slain, we are not alone.

Our sorrows bring us into fellowship with Christ.

Paul spoke of this fellowship to the church at Philippi, 3:10...

Philippians 3:10

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings...

GK Beale lists two specific connections from this passage to the life of a believer. I will list them for you as questions.

- 1. Do you and I really understand, do we grasp that in following Jesus we will suffer persecution and even death?**

Listen to what Peter wrote in his first letter, 4:12-19.

1 Peter 4:12-19

¹² Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

1 Peter 4:12-19

14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

16 ... if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

19 ...those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

2. Can we wait for God's timing in our suffering; can we trust him if he would have us lay down our life for him?

It is a great temptation to run ahead of God.

It is a common tendency to want God to use our plans; and to spare us from trouble.

To keep in step with the Spirit means to move at his speed, and to go where he is taking us.

Remember... the parable of the mustard seed... that grows slowly.

Remember the OT scriptures that speak of God doing something "suddenly!"

It is in the waiting for God's time and his best that one's character is forged.

It is in receiving the circumstances of our life from God's hand that faith grows.

God is never late.

When he acts it is always the right time!

And what he does is always the right thing.

What was the testimony of those whom John saw?

They knew the Lord to be Sovereign.

They knew he was holy and true.

They had proven that all who trust in him are never disappointed.

This is where the believer finds contentment of soul... in God's goodness and in his sovereignty. He does all things well!!!!

