

Victory from the Jaws of Defeat

Revelation 6:9-11

By [Dr. Douglas F. Kelly](#)

Thank you. I'll say what a joy it is to be back. It really feels like home to be in this church. I think all five of our children — some called them “the adorables” and another cousin calls them “the deplorables” — all of them came into communicant membership of this church. Indeed, I was speaking to one, Daniel, on the phone yesterday before I left, and I said, “Well, I won't be speaking in the sanctuary. That's been torn down and being reconstructed.” And he said, “Oh, that's terrible! I hate to think I'll never be able to sit down in that sanctuary where I was so blessed all my life.” I said, “No, son. I'm all for it. You'll love it. They're doing a wonderful job, and you'll rejoice when it's finished. It can accommodate more people.” So he said, “Well, it's all right, then!”

Anyway I can say I could not have chosen a better place to have brought up those five children than here in Jackson, and indeed in this church. As far as I know (I may have reason to eat my words later, and I say this only by God's grace)...as far as I know, all of them are in the faith, and all go to church, and all are tithers. And they specifically attribute much of their spiritual life to what they got out of this church: the preaching, the worship, and the lives of the people. So I owe much thanks to this church, and I rejoice just so greatly at the ministerial team — Ligon and Derek and Jim and the others. The Lord really has had great plans in store for you, to keep all these years such a solid group of men that are consecrated and love God and love people.

And I may say a word or two later in the week, but I am sure this church doesn't realize — naturally, you wouldn't — the massive influence you have across the world, far, far beyond Jackson and Mississippi. I was telling my classes that I had to cancel this week (they weren't all that sad), that First Presbyterian Church/Jackson, I owed it to them, because that is the mother church of Reformed Seminary — which, if you take all the branches it would certainly be one of the largest group of students in North America. I don't know exactly how many, but a lot came out of this church. And then — I haven't looked it up, but the percentage of missionaries that are sent from and prayed for and supported by this one church is very, very high in the Mission to The World and also in other missions. Just this one church has been mightily used of God both in education and in soul-winning and missions. I just thank the Lord for you, and I pray regularly for your protection and increase and blessing, being that the evil one will be distressed at how greatly God has used you and how He is going to use you. But

Christ has the victory, so that's our great confidence.

Now I hope you'll be able to hear me in the back. Can you all right? I have a classmate — we were together first grade through twelfth grade, and he's kind of a unique person. He's very honest...more honest than tactful! He doesn't go to church much, but when he comes and stays with us, he knows he needs to go to church; so the last time I filled in in this little country church out in the middle of the cotton fields of Dillon County, South Carolina (I enjoyed doing that), and he went. He was very proud: he had bought quite an extensive set of hearing aids that seemingly really did work.

And he said to me coming out the door — kind of a slow accent — “Douglas, I can understand every word you said.”

I said, “Well, that's good.”

He said, “Your sermon wasn't as boring as usual.”

I'm hoping the people at the back can hear enough to be bored!

All right then. Revelation 6:9-11. I'll read it, and it's in your bulletins as well. If you'll read along with me, not a long text, but a powerful text...and I really felt led as I was praying about this Conference...asked God to give me some sense of guidance to what to deal with...that this is where we would start:

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held; and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

Now here we have one of the rare, rare passages in all the inspired word of God where the curtain is pulled back and we are allowed to see what the translated saints are doing in heaven. In one of those rare glimpses of heaven, we are clearly taught by it that the prayers — in this case it is focused on the martyrs, those who were killed for the testimony of Jesus during their early lives — that the prayers of the martyrs are continuing to the Lord and are opening many a door for much greater blessing in the missionary activity of the church still on earth. That is what is brought out in this passage. And so we have here—and my whole thoughts tonight will be on this issue—the supernatural power of prayer of the believers operating between two worlds. That's the issue, and so just two points.

The first point is the connection between the two worlds: the one that we do not see most of the time (the heavenly realm where the throne of God is and the holy

angels and the place of ceaseless praise and our loved ones who have died and gone before us are there, and that's where we are going...we don't normally see that) — the connection between that place which is, as it were, the 'control chamber' for everything that is allowed to happen in this physical, natural cosmos. That one, and then this world that we live in, our flesh and blood workaday world where we are here from birth to our physical death. And there's the strongest and closest connection between those two worlds — the unseen one and the one we do see, and the one we do feel. And perhaps as close a connection as any, maybe the most important, or one of the most important of them, obviously God's will — is the prayers of the believers, both those that are already in the glory and those of us that are still for a while on this battlefield. And though that is (this connection between the two realms) extremely important, God says in His word, for the pushing forward of the mission of the Christian church in any one generation for the spreading of the gospel: the prayers of the saints, including the prayers of the saints that have been killed, supposedly defeated, but not so, really, in the service of God.

Now I'll say this. I've taught all these years — tried to teach — and I know that it is many times difficult for us to feel the importance of what we don't see.

Now one of the reasons this congregation has been so greatly used in missions is because you believe the Bible. Thank God for that. It is a "conservative" congregation. By that we mean you believe God's word. Absolutely right. But you see, sometimes it's hard to feel that it's true, enough to shape our behavior to pray out the promises of things God said He would do if we asked Him. It is all but impossible to live in this world and not be to some degree influenced by its rampant materialism. I know we're not materialists. We are conservative believers, by the Lord's mercy. But some days, unless you're putting your mind to it, you can feel like the only thing that matters much, the only thing that really counts would be the material realities, natural forces, and...you know, electromagnetism, gravity, nuclear structure, bodies, cars, houses, food...so all that's important, yes. It's of God.

But there's something far more important than that in getting God's will done in our generation, and that is the realm that is the most important of all. This one's important — the natural physical, financial realm is very important — made by God; but there's one that's even more powerful and more directly important in getting God's work done. It's the realm we do not see: the heavenly realm. And from the unseen realm comes the powerful making of changes that break...these changes break down strongholds of Satan and open doors for the advancement of the gospel and getting people saved, and defeating wickedness and bringing goodness and light and joy; that all the major advances of any time in history in any country in history, ultimately the decision is made up in the heavenly realm; and then we have all kinds of things because that begins to be executed here below. We have all kinds of things as the church to do.

Now this fifth seal — I'm not going into the prophetic significance (assuming I knew!) — if I can get out of it by telling you I don't have time! (I've been doing that for years!) Anyway, I may not know what it means, but at very least it is saying something was done in heaven to weaken the power of evil that was standing against the advancement of the gospel. Some scholars say it was the bringing down of apostate Judaism which was persecuting the early church and using the Roman Empire to do it, and making the way for the spread of Christianity. I'm not sure it's that. I don't know. What I'm saying is the breaking of this seal to open another chapter in history, it first starts in heaven. And it is the breaking of this seal to bring tremendous changes in the world, and supernaturally moving out of the way evil structures and wicked systems that hate God and His Christ and don't want the gospel to be heard...that started in heaven, and it was the answer to prayers of believers who had been killed for the love of Jesus. So I want to in the second part — it's the last part, although when I say the last, don't get your hope up it will be immediately through — the part the martyred saints play in determining world history, or really in determining the spread of Christianity through the nations.

Now one thing is brought out here that is consistent with everything we find in Scripture is this — and this again, we all believe this, and yet sometimes it's hard to feel it — and that is the saints who die (in this case the focus is on those that were killed, put to death...some of them were eaten by animals. They say Idi Amin in Uganda — my wife served one year with the Church of England in Uganda, not long before Amin took over — and so many Christians were thrown in that part of the Nile...the crocodiles literally got filled with eating them and wouldn't eat them anymore, and the bodies went down and were jamming the — I believe the Aswan Dam. It became a real problem. So some of the saints have been eaten by crocodiles, drowned, and other horrible things. Some burned, and some privileged to be buried and often forgotten on earth. But now what we're told here is that their ransomed soul, or their personalities, their personhood, the essential “them” that is not dependent for its continued existence on the welfare of the body, on the successful functioning of the...whatever...five bodily systems, or whatever keeps us going... their ransomed souls, who they really are, continue on the other side in that upper world, and they are as vibrantly alive as ever; probably more so, because they're closer to the Lord.

Now that's very important for the mission of the church. That's what I'm focusing on tonight: not just of the saints' endurance past the death of the body, though that's essential, but the part they play in the getting out of the holy gospel and the breaking down of false religions and hateful, wicked political powers.

Now, three things are said about the martyred saints in these few verses I read you. First, they are very near Almighty God under the altar (verse 9, Revelation 6); second, they are clothed in the beauty of white robes (that's verse 11); and third, as they are enjoying rest, they are talking to God about something and praying to God, interceding specifically about something (and that's in verses 10

and 11).

Number one, the first thing, their souls, their spirits, the real 'who they were' — memory, consciousness, and so forth; personal reality — but they are said to be (in verse 9) “under the altar” — God's altar. And scholars have not always agreed, and again I don't know. Does that mean that it is only the martyred saints who are that close to God under the altar, or is it all the Christians who have died in the Lord? I couldn't say about that. What I would say is God knows the right place where we need to be when we leave here, and I'm very, very happy with that. But all of the saints that leave here are close to God, and I take it that the martyrs may be a little closer.

And then we're told, secondly, that they are clothed in beautiful white robes. They have not merely continuing existence, but God gives them something even better than what they had when they were here. The white robes speak of splendor and loveliness and attractiveness, and alluring beauty. The death of their bodies on earth — some of them no doubt eaten by crocodiles, other terrible things done to them...shot, and so forth — does not prevent them from having a very beautiful shape above, in the other realm. The white loveliness of their beautiful garments comes from the red blood of Christ, as the altar they're under or near continues to remind. Let me say this: the martyrs being killed for Jesus are not saved by their own blood. They're saved as we're saved: only by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified for sinners and risen for their justification. They know that. The altar speaks to them that they are there because of what Christ did in their place and what He's done in our place.

So, nonetheless, going through the gates of death they have not merely, sort of like the Greeks and Romans believed, sort of a thin, vapid, airy, cloudy continuing existence that wasn't very agreeable; you can read that in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Odyssey*, and so forth. No, they have a beauty, something very wonderful about their existence. And that is spoken to us in

II Corinthians 5:11 — “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”; (verse 3) — “...so that being clothed, we shall not be found naked” and so forth. John Calvin says in his commentary that he believes this refers...that II Corinthians 5 is not primarily referring to the resurrection body that we shall get when the last trumpet shall sound on the Last Day when the Lord returns and all the saints are caught up in the air. Of course that's when our bodies will come out of the family cemeteries or wherever they've been deposited, but Calvin says he believes II Corinthians 1 is referring to the sort of a down payment on the resurrection body; that there's something in between; that the final resurrection body that we get — and I'm going to get out of the Kelly graveyard, and you'll get wherever they put you — there's sort of an intermediate reality that has a shape and a beauty and a loveliness that we get immediately when our soul leaves this body. We don't know too much about it, and I shouldn't

say any more, treading where I'm on, not knowing too much.

All right, the third thing that's said. In this serene realm where they enjoy the bliss of rest and refreshment in the green pastures of glory, beside the still waters of the crystal sea and the rainbow circled throne, and the singing of the blessed angelic choirs, near their Good Shepherd who makes heaven, heaven; these saints that were killed and now look so beautiful (we'll see them, we'll be with them), they are communicating with the Lord God omnipotent Himself. They have the ears of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, as we do when we pray in the name of Jesus. And He is the One who utters the last word and makes the final decision in every heavenly and human event that ever occurs: the fall of every leaf; the drop of every bit of rain; all matters, He has the final say in them.

Now, what are they talking to God about? And here I'll soon draw it to a point and to a conclusion. Verse 10: they're talking to the Lord about vindicating His church on earth. That is the burden of the prayers. They add their intercession for the bringing down of wickedness in this world that they have now left, and high above it in a wonderful place they still are caring about God's church in this world, and they are saying, "Lord, vindicate the suffering of Your servants. Break down these wicked armies and thoughts, philosophies, that are so potent, it seems; and so impressive and so demonic; deal with them, Lord, so that Your gospel can take wings and fly across the face of the nations. Now that's what the blessed saints are praying about above.

And God speaks of them very tenderly in verse 11, and it shows that God is the only one who is God, and He determines the times and the seasons. They say, "How long?" and basically, 'Lord, move quickly.' And who hasn't prayed that? And He says to His well-loved saints, of whom He is so proud, something like this: 'Dearly beloved children, I'm proud of you. I'm going to answer your prayers, but you will have to leave to Me the time factor. I'll decide exactly when is the right time to break down wickedness and to bring this healing, to open these doors, to do these things. It's good you're asking; your asking will be useful. Your asking will be answered. But I will determine exactly when it will be.' And He says, 'Now rest for a little season. I'm the determination of the length of this season, and then I'm going to answer your intercessions, and I'm going to move.'

I want to say this, and it will be, as I say, time to close. I could say a lot more, but I've said enough. I'll say this. The twentieth century, as far as I know (I've tried to read as much as I could) has been the most violent century against Christianity of any century of which we have record, and we have fairly decent historical records from all of the last twenty centuries — now into the twenty-first. Some say...now this last point, I couldn't confirm it, but it might be right. Some maintain that more Christians have been killed in the twentieth century than the other nineteen before that put together. I am not sure. I couldn't say that I've done the statistical work, but what I can say is never has any century since the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, dead, buried, and risen, poured out the Holy Ghost, - never

has any century seen so many believers killed — violent action taken against them — as the one we just came out of seven years ago.

I go to Ukraine more or less every year and teach the ministers or ministerial students — and our own Bo Bowen from here goes, and others, and bless you for it — and the Christians in Ukraine have told me a number of things. They weren't exactly forthcoming with it, but I asked them, and they pointed out — I'm usually somewhere around Kiev where this part-time seminary meets. We've got a lot of graduates, and many come, and it's run by the MTW. Richard Watson, who used to be the Dean out here at the seminary in Jackson is running it, and Paul Kooistra has a hand in it. I think it's a tremendous tool of the Lord for Eastern Europe. And when I'm there, I spend time with the students as best I can. And they pointed out to me one time, in most cities and large towns in Ukraine — at least that section of Ukraine where Kiev is — you can see these large mounds outside this city...just mounds of dirt, kind of like some of the Indian mounds that you see in the various parts of the Southern states...and that's the idea. They said that between the two World Wars, and really on to about 1950, Stalin and his group would send in the...whatever...I reckon the KGB or the secret service...and they literally...he systematically in Ukraine wanted to kill out the churches, and they would come at night and take the men. They would usually leave the women alone, because at that time women didn't fight in the military, so they would leave them alone, and they would take their husbands out at one or two o'clock in the morning, shoot them, kill them, dig a hole...and they'd take entire churches, the whole male membership of those churches, and throw the bodies and then I reckon a little bulldozer or something would cover up those mounds. You can still see the mounds. And I've talked to some of the grandchildren of men that are buried in those mounds. And then sometimes they would literally take the bulldozer and knock down the actual church, which, to Stalin's fury, in a few weeks the Christians would start building it back.

Now, I don't know, and nobody knows...plenty of people were killed in Ukraine and Soviet Union that were not necessarily Christians. It was for other reasons. But I do know vast numbers of people were killed because they were Christians. And in Ukraine today, of people over sixty years old, the women outnumber the men eight to one. You go to any meeting, or on the streets. The women over sixty outnumber the men eight to one. Why? They have a normal birthrate like the rest of us. About even. But it is because the Communists killed the males, particularly the Christians.

Now, a lot of blood was shed in Ukraine, which is one of the reasons I'm willing to go back. I'm getting on up in years, but I can't think of resting as long as I've got the ability to go, because the needs are great. And I say...in Ukraine, I was in a meeting...and I'll close with this...I was in a meeting, a prayer meeting, two years ago. It wasn't long after the Orange Revolution. And I don't speak Russian...maybe ten words at best...but I had a lady who had been one of my

translators speaking in my ear what they were praying at this prayer meeting. It had a lot of the leadership, including, believe it or not...the head of the Protestant religion for all of Ukraine is a graduate of our conservative evangelical seminary. He was there. They were praying. And they believe that Ukraine may be in the early stages of some kind of reviving, or certainly spiritual awakening. We'll see. And they were praying that it would spread to Russia, and then they were praying—you should have heard the tender prayers for the United States of America. And I feel...I mean, there's an amazing openness there. That's why I'm willing to go and, you know, teach them seven or eight hours a day. And they still want to talk to you. They take it all in, and come back for more. I believe that the opening, the spreading of the gospel somewhere like that, has got a direct relationship to the suffering and the blood.

Now this next thing is sheer speculation, and I don't say I know, but I wonder sometimes if one of the ways that God works wouldn't be that the martyrs from a particular region might be praying for where they came from, and that opening doors below. I'm not sure about that.

I just want to say what a glorious God we have. Our mission cannot be defeated. They can kill our people, and as Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." And they say 'We've got rid of these horrible Christians; we've killed them.' Now wait a minute, buddy! They're upstairs! They're closer to God and they're still praying for the mission, helping us go forward. We who are alive, how very privileged we are to join the saints in the higher realm in praying and giving, and indeed, going. I'm going to talk...I'm not going to tell you what I'm going to talk about going, because you might not come! But I'm going to talk about it when you're not expecting it.

I want to conclude with this little poem, and then that really is it.

A Southern Presbyterian missionary, originally in Florida, E. H. Hamilton...some of you would know him as a missionary in China. And when Mao's group came in, obviously the border was destabilized. And another Southern Presbyterian missionary, I believe Charles Vinson and his wife, were accosted by Chinese bandits and they threatened them, took their money, and then they pointed guns at them and said 'You don't seem to be scared. Don't you know we can kill you?' In fact, the bandits were offended they weren't scared. They really were, according to some people there that related it later. They said 'Well, look. We know you can kill us, but that's all you can do. If you do that, we'll be immediately in the presence of our heavenly Father in joy unspeakable and full of glory.' And they were infuriated and shot them. And E.H. Hamilton was told that in a day or two, and this is a poem he sat down and wrote in fifteen minutes. I couldn't have written it in fifteen years. Listen to it. It's entitled *Afraid?* Remember these people are praying, and this is the answers:

"Afraid? Of what?"

To feel the spirit's glad release?
To pass from pain to perfect peace?
The strife and strain of life to cease?
Afraid of that?
"Afraid? Of what?
Afraid to see the Savior's face;
To hear His welcome, and to trace
The glory gleam from wounds of grace?
Afraid of that?
"Afraid? Of what?
A flash, a crash, a pierced heart?
Darkness, light?
Of heaven's art, a wound of His a counterpart?
Afraid of that?
"Afraid? Of what?
To enter into heaven's rest,
And yet to serve the Master best?
From service good to service best?
Afraid of that?
"Afraid? Of what?
To do by death what life could not?
Baptize with blood a stony plot,
Till souls shall blossom from the spot.
Afraid? Of that?"

Amen. Let the church hear what God says to His people.

Now let's stand and sing *The Doxology*. It seems appropriate.

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