

MARTYRDOM IN THE LAST DAYS



Martyrdom, like the death of soldiers in a war, is a supreme sacrifice, the giving of one's life for a higher cause. Jesus died for us and he calls on us to take up our cross and follow him. Paul said, "It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29). We naturally shy away from the idea of suffering or dying, even if it is for Jesus' sake, and we may think that God will always protect us, but the fact is that there are nigh on a hundred thousand martyrdoms every year; it is not something that God prevents. At the end of this age, there is going to be a terrible time of suffering for the whole world and Christians will not be immune from it. Much of the suffering will result from warfare and the rise of the greatest human dictator the world has known, the Antichrist, also known as the man of lawlessness. This period, known as the Great Tribulation, will last for seven years, and God will pour out his wrath on an unrepentant, godless world when Jesus returns to judge the wicked and save the

righteous. You may wonder how you could endure martyrdom, but God has promised to be with his people always. He will give his people the faith and strength to endure. Two things will be a comfort at that time. Firstly, you will not be alone, the whole worldwide church will be affected, and millions of believers from every people, tribe, language, and nation will be given the choice of worshiping Christ or Satan. And secondly, we fear death, because it is the end of life, but in this case, death will be quickly followed by resurrection. Our hope for the future depends on our resurrection. Paul said, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19). The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. Our resurrection is the beginning of our glorification. As children of God, we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. If we share in his sufferings, we will also share in his glory.

Following are the important verses that bear on the probability of our being martyred if we happen to be in the last generation of believers before Christ’s return, which seems highly likely.

Dan 7:21-22 As I watched, this horn was waging war against the holy people and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the holy people of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.

Daniel is the only Old Testament prophet who predicts the rise of the Antichrist and the suffering of the church during the Great Tribulation. The Antichrist is the horn (power) who will wage war on the saints and kill many in the final days before Jesus returns. They will be rewarded after the resurrection with the possession of the monarchy in Messiah’s kingdom and will reign with him over the earth.

Lk 18:7-8 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

Jesus did not say a lot about the church in the last days, because his ministry was to the Jews, but his question in the verse above suggests that the number of believers alive at the time of his return will be less than expected.

2 Tim 2:11-12 If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

Paul confirms here that if we have died with Christ, we will live and reign with him. The context suggests that Paul is talking about enduring suffering and persecution, even martyrdom.

The rest of the Scriptures are from the last book of the Bible, Revelation, which speaks about the things to come at the end of the age.

Revelation 1:9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Christians are companions of the apostle John in the suffering, kingship, and perseverance that are ours in Jesus. John was imprisoned on Patmos because of his Christian beliefs. He saw many visions about the events of the last days, including the Great Tribulation, when God's people will be persecuted and martyred by the Antichrist. He says that we are partners with him

in the suffering that we endure as Christians on our way to inheriting the kingdom of God.

Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 21 To the one who is victorious I will give ...

In each letter that John writes to the seven churches, Jesus makes a promise to those who overcome and conquer the beast (Revelation 15:2) by not submitting to him. He promises them a place in his government in the New Jerusalem from where they will rule the nations during the millennium.

Revelation 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.

Christians at Smyrna are encouraged to be faithful, even if it means being martyred, and they will receive a victor's crown. The promise applies to all Christians.

Revelation 2:13 You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

Antipas was one of the early martyrs. He was a faithful witness. The Greek word for martyr means witness. Martyrdom is a powerful witness for Jesus. Satan is behind all efforts to annihilate Jews and Christians.

Revelation 3:21 To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Jesus was victorious when he suffered crucifixion. He ascended to heaven and sat down on God's heavenly throne. Now he promises those who are victorious over the Antichrist that they will sit with him on his earthly throne.

Revelation 5:5-6 Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain.

In the throne-room scene Jesus, the Lion of Judah, the descendant of King David was described as triumphant, even though he was crucified. His death has resulted in the salvation of millions of souls.

Revelation 5:12 Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!

No cross, no crown! The Lamb who was slain is worthy to receive all power and glory.

Revelation 6:9-11 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 full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

When the fifth seal was opened, John saw the souls of Christians in heaven who had been slain because they stood by the Bible and did not deny their Lord. The white robes are symbolic of their righteousness. They are told to be patient until the full number of martyrs are slain, suggesting a large number.

Revelation 7:14 These (a great multitude that John sees in heaven) are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

John sees the souls of a great multitude of people standing before God’s throne in heaven. They are tribulation martyrs from all

nations and languages. Knowing that they are saved, they praise and worship God and Jesus.

Revelation 11:7 Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the public square of the great city—which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt—where also their Lord was crucified.

The two witnesses in Revelation 11 are Jewish Christians who preach for 3 ½ years in Jerusalem. They perform miracles and have the power to prevent rain from falling. They can pollute water and bring pandemics to earth. In the middle of the Great Tribulation, the Antichrist comes to Jerusalem and kills these prophets, who after three days come back to life and ascend to heaven. The Antichrist then sets himself up in God's temple and begins his slaughter of God's people.

Revelation 12:11, 17 They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. ... Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

The Antichrist begins his plan to annihilate Jews, then, when he fails, he turns on Christians, seeking to thwart God's plan for them and the Messianic kingdom. God strengthens his people, and they triumph over the Antichrist, not in a worldly way by fighting him, but by trusting in God and refusing to deny Christ. They embrace death gladly, knowing that the day of resurrection is not far away. "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." (NIV), or "They did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die" (NLT). They triumph over the Antichrist by maintaining their faith in the cross and the power

of Jesus' blood, by confessing their allegiance to Jesus, and by choosing to die for Jesus rather than denying him.

Revelation 13:5, 7 The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise its authority for forty-two months. ... It was given power to wage war against God's holy people and to conquer them. And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation.

Chapter 13 describes the rise of the final world empire (the beast from the sea) and the Antichrist (the beast's leader and mouthpiece). He reigns for 3 ½ years, the final period before Jesus returns, and wages war against the church in every country of the world.

Revelation 13:10 If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people.

Everybody on earth will submit to the Antichrist, except those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, genuine Christians who do deny their allegiance to Christ. Imprisonment and death by a weapon are God's ordained route to victory, so Christians need to understand that and patiently endure the persecution. Their faithfulness to God in the time of persecution will be their victory. The joy of the Lord will be their strength (Nehemiah 8:10).

Revelation 13:15 The second beast was given the power to give breath to the image of the first beast so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.

The second beast comes from the earth, a false prophet who supports the Antichrist. He makes an image of the beast and gives

it some sort of life so that it speaks and condemns to death all who refuse to worship it.

Revelation 14:1, 4 Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ... These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they remained virgins. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among mankind and offered as first fruits to God and the Lamb.

John had a vision of 144,000 Christians, who were to be sealed (Revelation 7:1-8), a symbolic number (12 x 12 x 1000) representing Israel (12), the church (12), and a complete number (1000). Now he sees them with Jesus on Mount Zion in fulfillment of Psalm 2:6. They have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and Jesus, first fruits because they are a choice offering, and virgins because they are pure and faithful, they don't worship Antichrist. They are before God's throne in heaven, and they sing a new song. They are tribulation martyrs, the same people John saw before (Rev7:1-4, 7:9-17).

Revelation 14:9-13 A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment will rise forever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name." This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus. Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write this:

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.”

This is an important warning to the church that they must endure patiently and not submit to the demands of the Antichrist and his false prophet. As Satan is the power behind the Antichrist, everyone will have to choose whether they will worship Christ or Satan. There can be no compromise, no receiving of his mark or his name on their bodies. They must remain faithful, even in the face of starvation, imprisonment, or martyrdom, which is not a shame or even a disaster. It is something to be proud of in the next life, having followed in the Master’s footsteps. Those who have genuine faith will find strength in the Lord and they will be blessed and rewarded for their devotion; nothing less than ruling the world with Christ during the millennium. The martyrs are described as victors, conquerors, and overcomers.

Revelation 15:2-3 And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire, and standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and the number of its name. They held harps given to them by God and sang the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb.

Again, John sees the souls of the victorious tribulation martyrs in heaven. What joy is theirs as they play their musical instruments and sing the song of Moses (Exodus 15), which celebrated victory over another evil empire, Egypt. They quote Psalm 86:9, saying that all nations will come and worship before the Lord because his righteous acts have been revealed.

Revelation 16:5-6 You are just in these judgments, O Holy One, you who are and who were; for they have shed the blood of your holy people and your prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.

As the bowls of wrath are poured out on an unbelieving world, an angel declares that they deserve their punishment because they killed his saints and prophets.

Revelation 17:6 I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

The woman is Babylon the Great. She symbolizes the last great world empire, called the mother of prostitutes and detestable things of the earth. She represents godless city life and culture. All the megacities of the world are characterized by opulence, pride, greed, corruption, immorality, and the persecution of God's people. It is the populations of the great cities of the world who will be responsible for killing the saints during the Great Tribulation, just as Hitler's henchmen did.

Revelation 18:24 In her was found the blood of prophets and of God's holy people, of all who have been slaughtered on the earth.

Another reference to the megacity, symbolically called Babylon, in which the saints will be killed. God's advice to the church in verse four is: "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins so that you will not receive any of her plagues."

Revelation 19:2 He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.

Babylon the Great will fall. All the cities of the world will be destroyed (Revelation 16:19) as God takes vengeance on them for killing his servants.

Revelation 20:4 I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their

foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

John's final vision of the souls of the tribulation martyrs concerns their resurrection, as verse five makes clear. He said they were beheaded, but this may not be the only method of execution. They were killed because they refused to deny their allegiance to Jesus, and they refused to bow down to the Antichrist or to take his name or mark on their bodies. They were killed because they believed and proclaimed the word of God, the Bible. Although the verse highlights the tribulation martyrs, Christians from all ages are heirs of the kingdom and will reign with Christ over the earth for a thousand years.

Revelation 21:7-8 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolators, and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.

‘Those who are victorious’ refers especially to the martyrs, but not exclusively. They will live in their eternal abode, God's holy city that is called the New Jerusalem, that will come down out of heaven from God. God will be in the holy city with them, and they will be his children. He will make all things new, and the martyrs will inherit this new paradise. The unbelievers, on the other hand, are consigned to what is described symbolically as a fiery lake of burning sulfur. For the redeemed, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away.