

Revelation 6:9-11. The Fifth Seal



This is the continuation of [The Last Prophecy: An Abridgment of Elliott's Horae Apocalypticae.](#)

Last Pagan Persecution Of The Church, Diocletian. A.D. 303-311.

[9] ¶ 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:

[10] 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?

[11] 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 fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled. (Rev 6:9-11)

A SCENE QUITE DIFFERENT from any that he had yet contemplated met St. John's eye on the opening of the fifth seal. It is no longer the Roman earth which he sees before him, but the symbolic temple-court, from whose altar proceed, – not the voices of living worshippers, presenting their sacrifices for atonement, or thanksgiving and free-will offerings, but the cries of departed and martyred saints, who had been slain for their testimony to the word of God.

We have brought the history down to that division into four parts by Diocletian which terminated the Roman Empire as it had hitherto been constituted. The era is one famous in Roman history. His four immediate predecessors had kept the empire in existence, and even helped, in some degree, towards its elevation; yet was this emperor considered as the founder of a new empire, and a triumph was decreed to him at Rome in the year A.D. 303. Here, then, for the present, we must turn from the history of the Roman world to take a survey in retrospect of the persecutions that had passed on the Christian Church during three centuries, before we notice the persecutions which marked the reign of Diocletian.

I adverted before to the spread of religion in the year A.D. 96, in the sketch of what must have passed before St. John's view in Patmos. Small as was its first beginning, Christianity had made considerable progress. Its founder had taught his disciples to expect that so it would be; but he had at

the same time warned them that hatred and persecution from the world would mark its course: "In the world ye shall have tribulation."

The first imperial persecution was in the reign of Nero. This cruel tyrant, having himself set fire to Rome, laid the odium of it on the Christians, in the hope that the hatred already existing against them would give currency to the charge. Fearful sufferings then ensued. Some of the condemned were covered with the skins of wild beasts, and in that disguise devoured by dogs; some were crucified; others burnt alive. "When the day was not sufficient," says the historian, "for their tortures, the flames in which they perished served to illuminate the night." Nero looked on for his amusement. In this persecution, it is said, St. Paul was beheaded and St. Peter crucified. These martyrdoms took place before St. John's death.

The next great persecution was during the reign of Domitian. It originated more from jealousy than from wanton cruelty. Besides the charge of Atheism brought against the Christians, the sect were said to be seeking a kingdom. To hinder this, the emperor slew his own cousin, a Christian of the highest rank known; and summoned also the existing relations of Him who was regarded as the Christian's king; but finding that these were but poor men, not looking for a temporal inheritance or earthly grandeur, he dismissed them with contempt; sending the last of the apostles, John, in banishment to Patmos.

In Trajan's reign a law was for the first time issued against Christians *because they were Christians*. An old law was in existence which decreed that no god should be worshipped unless admitted and recognized as such by public authority. This edict Trajan was advised to enforce. He, however, mildly declared that no inquisition should be made for the Christians; but that, when brought before the magistrates in the regular course of law, if they should refuse to sacrifice to the gods, they must needs suffer.

This edict, intended to prevent the search for Christians, and so rather to favor them, had a contrary effect, as it pronounced the profession of Christianity illegal, and left it in the power of any governor or other person to persecute them; and so it proved. Numbers were added to the martyr band, and many more souls gathered under the altar. Amongst others, Ignatius, the venerable Bishop of Antioch, joined his brethren there before this reign had closed. In writing to the Church of Smyrna he says, "Wherefore have I given" myself up unto death, to fire, to sword, to wild beasts? The nearer I am to the sword, the nearer to God. When I am among the wild beasts, I am with God. In the name of Jesus I undergo all, to suffer together with him." A little time after, in the great amphitheater of Rome, to which city he had been sent for execution, he was thrown to wild beasts amidst the exultations of assembled myriads.

Again, in the reign of the second Antonine, after a time of rest, persecution recommenced, and every form of cruel torture and death was exhibited to the Christians. Amongst other sufferers, Polycarp and Justin Martyr were; executed; and they too went to their waiting brethren. Many also of the confessors of the faith at Lyons met the same fate.

An interval elapsed, and then oppression of the Church began afresh in the reign of Septimius Severus, which specially fell on the Churches of Africa and Egypt. Some boldly appealed against these persecutions, and many apologies for Christians, as these writings were called, were put forth.

Again, in the reign of Alexander, though that prince professed to respect the Christians and their morality, yet one and another laid down his life as the penalty of his faith in Christ; – among them, Hippolytus, Bishop of Porto. Maximin renewed the royal edict, and specially directed his persecution against the bishops and pastors.

Hitherto these unjust measures had been carried out against one Church here, and another there; but Decius determined upon crushing Christianity. His edict compelled inquisition to be made for them, and decreed torture and death to all Christians. Great now was the consternation. The Church had lost its first zeal and love. There were those who dared not to confess their creed, yet would not apostatize. Bribes of money were offered to and accepted by the magistrates, and thus the conflict was spared to the offerers. The sword of the Goths struck down this persecuting emperor, and left his cruel work to be continued by his successor, Valerian, whose aim, in like manner, was against the bishops and presbyters, and the worshiping assemblies of Christians. Then Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, was added to the noble army of martyrs.

Valerian, who followed in the same course, was cut down by the Persian sword; and his son, Galienus, trembling under his judgments and fearing the Christians' God, issued the first edict of toleration, A.D. 261. Their churches and burying-grounds were restored, and their worship allowed to have place unmolested.

Such, briefly, is the history of persecution up to the reign of Diocletian. During the reigns of four emperors who preceded him, viz., Claudius, Aurelian, Tacitus, and Probus, there was a respite. Churches were built, and worship in them legalised. Diocletian, we have seen, founded a new empire, and had his triumphal day at Rome, A.D. 303. Early, however, in that year, a secret council was held in the palace at Nicomedia between Diocletian and his partner on the throne, Galerius, to whom he had given the most easterly division of the empire. The destruction of Christianity was the subject. "Perhaps," says Gibbon, "it was represented to him that the glorious work of the deliverance of the empire was left imperfect so long as an independent people, i.e., the Christians, were permitted to subsist and multiply in it." on the 23rd February an armed force destroyed the church of Nicomedia. This was the signal; and for a period of ten years the direst persecution that had yet taken place raged against Christianity.

Diocletian declared his intention of abolishing the very name of Christian. Their blood was shed mercilessly through the whole empire. This period is called the "era of martyrs."

Before the ten years had expired, Diocletian, Galerius, and Maximian agreed to raise pillars as monuments to commemorate their success in the extirpation of Christianity. These pillars are still extant.

Whoever visits Rome may still see the Catacombs, and will be shown there the quiet resting-places of the bones and ashes of the martyrs of this season. Earthen vases, inscribed with the word blood, still show how precious was even this remembrance to their mourning friends. There, too, will be seen the larger cavities below, where the excavated and rude chapel served as a house of prayer, and where a faithful Church assembled far below the level of the city. The only public testimony then given by the people of Christ was in their martyrdom. In vain did Pagan power try to destroy the Holy Scriptures. Copies had so multiplied, and been so carefully hid, that inquisition for these failed.

But we would draw attention to the next clause in the text, "How long, O Lord, Holy One and true, dost thou not avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"

This cry for vengeance seems scarcely in accordance with the feelings of the first martyrs, who "rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Christ." But it is their cry in the ears of the survivors. It was said by the Lord of Abel, "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground;" and the vengeance of God on his enemies and on the enemies of his people is often adverted to in the Epistles. Thus, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." (Rom. 12:19.) And for this requiting vengeance the Church in the third century was wont to look. Thus Marianus, an African martyr, "as if filled," we read, "with a prophetic spirit, warned his persecutors and animated his brethren by proclaiming the speedy avenging of his blood."

Year after year did they wail and long for some turn in their favor. From those long, narrow passages, on either side walled with their dead brethren and martyred children, as we before noticed, in the Catacombs of Rome, — from those subterranean houses of prayer, as they looked on the vases of blood drained from the death-wounds of all dear to them, their cry was wont to ascend to heaven. Did not the wailing souls almost seem to impeach the justice of God, and his other attributes: "How long, O Lord, holy, just, and true, dost thou not avenge our blood?"

"And white robes were given to each of them."

Just as their condemnation in the view of their fellow-men is depicted by their being under the altar, so would their equally public exaltation and justification before the world be expressed in their being robed in white.

And so it was. The historian tells us that the Emperor Galerian issued an edict, agreed to by the two other emperors, confessing (at least by implication) that he had wronged the Christians, putting an end to the persecution, and entreating "that they would pray to their God for him."³ This was indeed an act of justification not less applicable to the memory of those gone before than to the character of those still surviving. It was a moral triumph of the Christian religion over Paganism. So while the three preceding seals showed the decline of the Roman Empire, this seal showed the corresponding decline of Paganism as a system.

These waiting souls were told that they should rest yet a little while till their brethren should have joined them. This probably referred to another line of witnesses, of whom more hereafter.

I have named Polycarp as one of the sufferers by martyrdom during this era. Unwilling to interrupt the narrative, I omitted to transcribe a passage from the Acts of his Martyrdom which is of much interest. "Having his hands tied behind him, and being bound to the stake, he looked up to heaven and said, 'O Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of thee, I give thee hearty thanks that, at this day and hour, I should have a part in the number of thy martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, unto the resurrection of eternal life; amongst whom may I be accepted this day before thee as an acceptable sacrifice. I praise thee, I glorify thee, my God and my Saviour.'"

Continued in [Revelation 6:12-17. The Sixth Seal](#)

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