

Introduction

I have listened to exactly *two* audiobooks in my life. Last summer I listened to the book “Dominion” by Tom Holland—the *historian*, not *Spider Man*. It’s an amazing book tracing how Christianity has shaped our notion of personal and civil rights. Before the church of Jesus began the idea of individual dignity and individual rights was simply unheard of. As an historian, he argues that we get this idea entirely from the Christian faith.

The only other audiobook I’ve listened to was not by choice. It was two summers ago. My wife and I drove to North Carolina on my study break and she told me she had downloaded an audiobook for us to listen to. When I heard that my eyes rolled—*in love*, of course. My wife and I are different. We enjoy different music. We enjoy different foods. If it is spicier than ketchup, she’s out. She won’t enjoy it. It’s my cross to bear. It’s no surprise that we read vastly different books. She loves books about murder and mayhem and I enjoy good books.

The book she chose was written by Daniel Nayeri. The author wrote mostly about his life in middle school—and from his middle-school self’s perspective—while also sharing how his mother and sister and he had to escape from Iran when she became a follower of Jesus. They found themselves in Oklahoma and Daniel shares the story of their flight from Iran and his family’s pain and suffering in various ways. As a poor immigrant child he experienced particular pain, and this is where the brilliance of his story really shines.

I’ve read a number of reviews of the book since listening to it and many reviewers miss a significant point. He doesn’t say that everything sad *will come* untrue; he says everything sad *is* untrue—right now, in this life. We are so accustomed to the brokenness in the world we assume it’s all true, that this is just the way it is and the best we can hope for is that one day it will be “fixed”. Hear me: that part is true. One day all that is sad will “come” untrue, but what this really means is all that is sad will be shown to be what it has always been: a lie about ultimate reality.

While the book is not a “Christian” book, the author has a great deal of insight into God. This particular line stands out:

If you believe it’s true, that there is a God and He wants you to believe in Him and He sent His Son to die for you—then it has to take over your life. It has to be worth more than everything else, because heaven’s waiting on the other side.

Daniel Nayeri, “Everything Sad Is Untrue”

The truth of it all is that there is a God and he wants you to believe in him and he sent his Son to die for you, but there’s more. The reason everything sad is untrue is because resurrection *is true*. In a world of suffering and pain we all ask variations of the same two

questions. The first is why. Why is this happening? The second is when. When will it finally end? The answer was revealed on that Easter morning.

This morning I want to explore the very idea of resurrection and what it has to do with suffering. I want us to see that the promise of future resurrection must take over our life in the present, for it is God's promise that everything sad is untrue and one day the lie will be exposed, and when it is, this world will be forever changed. To get there, let's take a look at John's vision in Revelation.

Seals

Years after all the other apostles died, John was still alive, though he was in exile—in *prison*. While in exile he had plenty of time to reflect on the world. He had walked with Jesus. He was an eyewitness to the miracles of Jesus. He was an eyewitness to the resurrection! Then for decades he watched the Lord building his church all over the known world through the witness and testimony of the apostles, including the latecomer Paul. Paul had initially opposed the church, and opposed it with great violence but the Lord was merciful and gracious and not only saved Paul, he called him to serve as an apostle.

These churches grew at different rates. Some areas seemed particularly fertile for the gospel while others seemed to take more time. Still, the church of Jesus grew. Even during periods of intense persecution churches grew. Near the end of his life John decided to write about human history with a literary genre known as apocalyptic.

This style of literature was filled with symbolism. For a couple hundred years the Jewish people had loved apocalyptic, with its fanciful creatures and its divine message given through visions and angelic beings. Apocalyptic concerned itself with ultimate reality in stark terms of black and white. In apocalyptic there were no shades of gray. You were either entirely faithful or you were entirely unfaithful. You were either completely good or you were completely evil. This was characteristic of the genre.

In Revelation 5 John had a vision of a scroll with writing on both sides, and it was sealed with seven seals. Even this, the number of seals, was symbolic, representing the whole number of seals. An angel asked loudly who was worthy to open the seals, for the scroll contained God's plans for human history. When John saw there was no one worthy, he began to weep, only to be told there was one who was worthy: the Lion of the tribe of Judah was worthy, for he has conquered.

Following the pattern of hearing something great and then seeing it but what he sees is an even greater, John heard the Lion of Judah had conquered, but the greater manifestation of this victory was John saw a Slaughtered Lamb. Through death this Lamb's victory was overwhelming. Though it initially appeared as a defeat, John saw the Lamb standing, very much alive. The Lamb—Jesus—took the scroll and began to open the seals.

When the first seal was opened John saw war and conquest. This represents all of human history, not some time near the end of history. War and conquest characterize human experience. This brings pain and suffering, for ordinary people are those who suffer the most during war and during armed conflict.

Then the second seal was opened. We shouldn't read the events happening in each seal as happening sequentially. Rather, the events taking place during the first five seals are concurrent; they also happening at the same time. In the second seal John sees violence

everywhere. When nation isn't attacking nation citizen is attacking citizen. Murder and violence have caused great pain and suffering throughout human history.

When the third seal was opened John saw economic hardship, with—I kid you not—runaway inflation causing great misery. In Revelation 6:6 he hears the price of necessary goods:

Rev 6:6 And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"

Revelation 6:6

John saw in that vision a scale, the sort used in economic transactions, indicating the economic hardship being seen. A denarius was a coin worth a typical day's wage. The average worker would earn about a denarius a day. A quart of wheat would generally feed one person for a day. Imagine working a full day to earn enough food for just yourself. That doesn't cover shelter or clothing or anything else that is necessary. It covers your basic food needs.

He also sees that three quarts of barley could be purchased for a denarius and while this may seem better, it's really not. Three quarts of barley might be enough to sustain a small family, but again, that takes up all of a day's wage. You will need shelter, and you will need diapers, and medical care, and new shoes. See the problem? The entirety of a paycheck would be taken up by the barest essentials for food.

John also hears the order that the oil and wine are not to be harmed. In a world in which an entire paycheck goes to wheat or to barley, oil and wine are luxuries. Who can afford luxuries? Only the wealthy! In such a world the wealthy are being protected and the common folk continue to suffer. There are far more common folk than there are wealthy folk so it's not hard to see the widespread suffering in this.

When the fourth seal is opened John sees death and famine and disease. More suffering. More pain. Again, these seals cover the entirety of human history. What John sees is a symbolic representation of what ordinary people have experienced since Adam and Eve were tossed out of the garden.

The truth is war and armed conflict and violence and theft and all sorts of petty crimes and economic hardships and death and disease are the things that make up life in this world. Whether these things are caused by war or famine or natural disaster, this is the human experience in this broken world. This doesn't even begin to touch the brokenness in our personal lives. There are those who appear to not suffer, who seem to have everything put together—including oil and wine!—yet they, too, suffer.

The Fifth Seal

This brings us to our text. John sees the Slaughtered Lamb who reigns open the fifth seal, and the perspective changes. In the first four John saw human history as a whole, with all its suffering and pain from the perspective of those who were still on the earth. Then we read this:

Rev 6:9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.
¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”
¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Revelation 6:9–11

The perspective of suffering shifts to those who died in faith. John sees their souls under the altar. He only sees their souls because they are waiting for resurrection. Again, this is apocalyptic literature. There are no shades of gray, no nuance. There is all or there is nothing. John sees those who died in faith and he sees them all as martyrs. They had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.

When John wrote this there were certainly those who had been killed for their faith, but we should not limit this to only those who had been killed for their faith. Even those who died of natural causes were represented under the altar in John’s vision. In fact, Jesus declared each one of us must be martyrs—even if not at the hands of others.

Mt 16:24 Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Matthew 16:24

Jesus didn’t mean a necklace or a sweet tattoo. A cross had exactly one function: it was an instrument of death. Jesus told his disciples they must give up their lives in order to follow him. You cannot cling to your life and follow Jesus. The life of following Jesus is a life of self-denial. John sees the souls of those who had denied themselves to the very end under the altar in heaven.

Having died in faith and in faithfulness to the Lord, they are with him in heaven, but they are not yet where they should be. They are currently “under the altar”. To the original recipients being “under the altar” was a stark image. They would have immediately understood the concept of Greek altar asylum.

In the ancient Greek world a person who had been falsely accused could seek asylum by entering into a temple and holding onto the altar in that temple. This was a plea for justice by those who often had no resources and no influence and therefore no other way to be granted justice. They were falsely accused and couldn’t defend themselves. As long as they were under the protection of the altar they couldn’t be harmed. The priests of the temple would then represent the falsely accused person in legal proceedings.

Here is a picture of Menelaus and his wife Helen. In the story of the Trojan Horse, Helen ran away to the city of Troy with a guy named Paris. Menelaus launched a navy of a thousand ships in order to get her back. In this second picture we see Menelaus grabbing her hand with a sword in the other, ready to strike her in anger. There are lots of versions of what happened next, but in this third picture we see her left foot touching the altar of Apollo and Menelaus immediately casts away his sword. She was protected by the altar. Menelaus could no longer kill her for fear of what the god Apollo would do to him. The ancient writer Aeschylus explained this:

Even for those who flee hard-pressed from war there is an altar, a shelter against harm through respect for the powers of heaven.

Aeschylus, “Suppliant Women”, 76

Later in the play he wrote,

Stronger than a castle is an altar—an impenetrable shield.

Aeschylus, “Suppliant Women”, 190

In the Greek mind the altar protected from danger. John appeals to this understanding in his vision. By standing under the altar, these saints were appealing to God for his protection, for they had been unjustly attacked and harmed. While under the altar they are protected from any further harm.

O Sovereign Lord

When we think of those who have died in Christ, we tend to think of them in heaven, fully healed of whatever disease or injury may have claimed them. We often say things like, “She’s no longer suffering”—and that’s true. Paul said “to live is Christ, and to die *is gain*”. For those who suffer in this life, their suffering ends when they are with the Lord, but this does not mean all is as it should be.

Notice what those under the altar cry out. They plead with the Lord for information: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” This is not a cry for petty revenge. It is not a pleading for wrath and judgment in retribution for what they have suffered. These saints have a fuller perspective of God and his holiness and the evil that continues on the earth.

See their faith in the question. First, they address him as the Sovereign Lord. They understand that in spite of the circumstances on earth, God in fact reigns. He is sovereign over human history, including the present circumstances on earth. As we see in the first four seals, those circumstances are filled with great suffering and pain.

They appeal to his character, for he is “holy and true”. They cry out as those protected by his altar knowing he is utterly trustworthy. Though many had suffered and suffered greatly, they know he is worthy of their trust. This is why they ask “how long” rather than “will you”. Justice is part of God’s character so it is only a matter of time when true justice will be done. They’re asking when, not if.

In response to their question God tells them to rest a little longer. To live is Christ and to die is gain. They are resting in the Lord as they wait for him to complete the work he started. The world is not yet recreated. There is still suffering and death. The saints under the altar are not suffering, yet they know there is more to be done, not only on earth, but for them in heaven.

When God tells them to rest a little longer he also gives them a white robe. This robe is a guarantee of their vindication. They have been justified through faith in Christ and it will be just a little longer before their vindication is fully declared on the day when the Lord returns. This robe symbolizes their salvation but is also a promise of what is to come.

Then God tells them something hard, something difficult. In verse 11 they must rest “until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were

to be killed as they themselves had been”. God assures them there is more suffering to come on the earth. More saints will die in Christ and will join them. They must remain under the altar until the day comes when their number is complete.

The hard truth is God has determined that his purposes will come about through suffering. Salvation comes about through the Lord’s own suffering. This is what our Tenebrae service was all about. We were acknowledging and recognizing the great suffering of our Lord in our place. God has determined his church will grow through more suffering.

We saw in Ephesians that Paul *was granted* to suffer on behalf of the Gentiles. He was in prison when he wrote this letter, and this meant suffering. In 2 Timothy Paul was nearing the end of his life, having suffered repeatedly throughout his decades of faithful service. He wrote to encourage young Timothy to remain faithful in his service as an elder in Ephesus and to not be ashamed of Paul’s suffering and imprisonment. He told him he “endures everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain” salvation.

Paul understood his suffering had a purpose and this purpose was God through his suffering would bring many to faith in the Lord Jesus. He said something even more profound to the Colossians.

Col 1:24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

Colossians 1:24–26

What in the world!?! Is Paul suggesting the sufferings of Jesus are somehow lacking? Severian in the fourth century helpfully explained what Paul means.

I fulfill what is lacking in the tribulations of Christ through my suffering, which is on your behalf. How so? Because in order to preach to you, I have had to suffer. Since Christ is the head of the body, tribulation will be generated through the word of truth for those who are in the church. These are naturally called the sufferings of Christ.

Severian of Gabala, Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church

God has determined to build his church through suffering. While Jesus suffered sufficiently for salvation, there is more suffering necessary for the spread of the gospel. Paul gladly endures that suffering. In our text God tells the saints under the altar to rest a little while longer, for there are more who must suffer as well.

Greg Beale put it this way:

Such sufferings are not meaningless but are part of God’s providential plan that Christians should pattern their lives after the sacrificial model of Jesus. Seen from the heavenly perspective, such sufferings ironically advance the kingdom of God, as was the case with Christ himself.

Greg Beale, NIGTC, p. 389

The saints who suffered on earth and are now under the altar of God's protection are told to wait a little longer. More will join them. Their prayers will be answered when the full number of their fellow servants should be complete. But then what?

Resurrection

When John wrote this he knew how it would end. He knew what the saints were longing for was coming. He knew what he himself was longing for was coming. It's only a matter of time. All the pain and the suffering and the injustice, all the war and the greed and the violence and the brokenness will come undone. The world that every single human being ever has been longing for is coming. In chapter 21 John saw a vision of that day.

Rev 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Revelation 21:1–5

John knew that this physical world is not the problem. The physical earth God created God declared was good. Sin has corrupted it so when the Lord Jesus returns he will re-create it. The new earth will be new *qualitatively*, not *quantitatively*. That is, it will be *this world*, but this world *renewed*. Remade. Re-created, not replaced. In that day all that is wrong with this present world will be undone. It will be forever removed and destroyed.

In that day all racism will cease. In that day all sexism and classism will cease. In that day wars and rumors of wars will be over. In that day disease will be forever banished from the earth. In that day lying and cheating and stealing will be a thing of the past. In that day physical and mental and emotional and sexual abuse will be destroyed. All suffering—the former things John has seen in his visions—will have passed away.

John records the declaration from the throne of God. In that day God himself will dwell on earth with his people—and they *will be* his people and he *will be* their God. Nothing shall ever threaten this relationship. In that day he promises to wipe away every tear from their eyes. Can you imagine this? Can you grasp the significance of this promise?

When God says he will wipe away every tear he means every wound you have ever experienced will finally be healed. The loneliness you felt, the kind that threatens to crush you, will be *healed*. It will no longer cause pain, no longer bring you to tears. The pain of loss of your loved one will be *healed*. The tears from that loss will be forever wiped away and you will never shed another tear, for there will be no more sense of loss.

The pain of physical ailments whether cancer or MS or a bum knee will no longer cause tears, for you will be *healed*. Your body will have been raised with immortality. A real, physical body to live on a real, physical earth forever, never again experiencing wounds and injuries—or tears, for they will have been *healed*.

The pain of injustice will no longer bring tears, for you will be *healed*. The system that causes housing shortages and skyrocketing rents, that causes people to be harassed by cops for their skin tone, that makes it difficult for those who work for a living to earn a living, that makes health care so very expensive and crushing, that system will be gone, forever replaced by true, lasting *justice*.

The horror of war and its associated atrocities will no longer cause tears, for this world will be *healed*. Nation will never again pick up arms to harm and destroy another nation, for war will simply cease. The horrifying images of bridges collapsing, of children kidnapped as pawns in armed conflict, of disease spreading rapidly around the entire world, of violence in the streets, will never again be broadcast on the news, for this world will be *healed*.

Relationships that are supposed to be a source of joy and well-being and delight will never cause tears, for you will be *healed*. Children will never be used again as pawns in divorce proceedings. Children will never go to bed hungry. Children will never feel the darkness of depression or anxiety. Men and women will never again feel the crushing sting of betrayal for they will be *healed*.

The abuse you experienced, whether as a child or as an adult, whether from a family member or a complete stranger, in whatever form that abuse came, will no longer cause tears, for *you will be healed*. There are some wounds we will carry for the rest of our earthly lives. Many of us know the kind of wound I'm talking about all too well. It's only a matter of time. He will wipe away every tear, and there will never be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for these former things will have passed away.

The shame you carry, whether from past sins you committed or sins that were committed against you, will no longer cause tears, *for you will be healed*. The wounds you've inflicted on others because of addictions or your negative reactions or your defensive responses to others in order to protect yourself will be healed. The sins that threaten to crush you will no longer cause tears, *for you will be healed*.

When God wipes away every tear from our eyes and promises there will never again be crying nor pain, he doesn't mean he will make us unaffected by pain and loss. He will not wipe away every tear by increasing the steely facade we put on, the one in which we act as though we're above it all, that we're too strong to be affected by real pain. The only way he can wipe away every tear is by eliminating the cause of every tear. When God promises he will wipe away every tear he's promising to bring that everlasting healing we all long for.

John hears the Sovereign Lord finally answer the saints who are under his altar crying out for justice. God promises them he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. God will do this when he causes the former things to pass away.

Church, this happens in the resurrection. When the Lord Jesus returns, he will raise his people from the dead, and will give them bodies that are immortal. Those who are alive at the time of his return will also be changed. They, too, will receive resurrected bodies. This is why God can say, "Behold, I am making all things new." The resurrection of the Lord

Jesus is God's promise that he will raise us, too.

Application

Let me be very clear: I am not merely saying, "Don't worry; things will get better." They will! John was certainly saying this in Revelation, but his message is even more profound than this. Daniel Nayeri really captured John's point:

What you believe about the future will change how you live in the present.
Daniel Nayeri, "Everything Sad Is Untrue"

What happened in the resurrection of Jesus is the very nature of reality changed. His resurrection signaled that God is transforming the very essence of the universe he created. What had been a world dominated by sin and corruption and death is now a world that has begun the process by which it will be completely remade—reborn, if you will. A new reality is penetrating into every dark corner of the universe and as John declares triumphantly in his Gospel, in Jesus is life and "The light shines into the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

There is no darkness too dark for the light of the gospel of Jesus to penetrate it—and eliminate it. There is no darkness that can overcome the light. Everything sad *is* untrue. This doesn't mean sadness doesn't exist. This doesn't mean pain and suffering aren't real. They are, and they are not punishment. This world itself is broken and pain and suffering are the result of sinful human choices, but that doesn't make pain and suffering punishment from God. What this means is these things belong to the old order, to the time before the resurrection. It is only a matter of time before the Lord Jesus completely transforms this world and causes the former things to pass away. The truth is the resurrection is a present reality. Richard Niebuhr wrote,

The resurrection means not merely that Christians have hope for the future but that they have hope that comes from the future. The Bible's startling message is that when Jesus rose, he brought the future kingdom of God into the present.

Richard Niebuhr

It's here, right now. God's kingdom is here. It starts out small, like a tiny mustard seed, but it will grow until it crowds out every competitor to the reign of Christ. His means of victory will be our means of victory. In the incredible words of D. A. Carson,

I'm not suffering from anything that a good resurrection can't fix.
Don Carson

As I've said before, the resurrection of Jesus means suffering has an expiration date. Church, it won't be long. We must cling to this reality, for it exposes the lie we all endure. Pain and suffering are real, but they describe a reality that is passing away. The resurrection is true. Resurrection will last forever, and it is a *present* reality. The resurrection of Jesus is a call for us to live in that reality. As Paul told the Colossians, when Christ appears, then

we will appear with him in glory. The fullness of that glory is yet to come, but it began to grow the moment Jesus walked out of that tomb.

Like the saints under the altar, we cling to the altar—to the risen Lord Jesus. He is our protection, our shield, our guarantee that resurrection is coming.