

The Fifth Seal

Revelation 6:9-11

The End Times

In my last post, we continued our journey in **Revelation 6** as the fourth of the **seven seals** was opened. In this post, we look at the **Fifth Seal**.

The Fifth Seal

"⁹ When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been put to death for proclaiming the Word of God, that is, for bearing witness. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, "Sovereign Ruler, HaKadosh [the Holy One], the True One, how long will it be before you judge the people living on earth and avenge our blood?" ¹¹ 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 should be reached, of their brothers who would be killed, just as they had been." ~ Revelation 6:9-11 (CJB)

"⁹ At that time you will be arrested and handed over to be punished and put to death, and all peoples will hate you because of me. ¹⁰ At that time many will be trapped into betraying and hating each other, ¹¹ many false prophets will appear and fool many people; ¹² and many people's love will grow cold because of increased distance from Torah. ¹³ But whoever holds out till the end will be delivered." ~ Matthew 24:8-13 (CJB)

The breaking of the **Fifth Seal** reveals a vision of the souls of the martyrs. Historians record 10 persecutions of the church in the first 300 years of its existence. One was already past (Nero, 64 CE), the second was just coming to an end (Domitian, 96 CE), and the third was soon to follow (Trajan, 98-117 CE). The image of martyrs was not alien to the first readers of Revelation. Nor is it unfamiliar in our own time, when Believers are killed in other countries. Some think that this seal refers to Believers converted after the Rapture and martyred during the reign of Antichrist at the time of the end. Their question is the question of all suffering Christians: How much longer? ~ which is another way of asking, Why? The answer: Be patient; God's plan will be accomplished.

Underneath the altar the souls. ¹ This odd image should be understood in the light of rabbinic literature. According to a work attributed to the second-century Rabbi Natan HaBavli,

"HaKadosh, blessed be He, took the soul of Moses and stored it under the Throne of Glory.... Not only the soul of Moses is stored under the Throne of Glory, but the souls of the righteous are also stored there."

"Rabbi Akiva used to say... 'Whoever is buried beneath the altar is as though he were buried beneath the Throne of Glory.'" (Avot diRabbi Natan 12:4, 26:2)

According to the Talmud, the third-century Rabbi Abba Arikha, known as Rav, taught that the archangel Michael offers a sacrifice on the heavenly altar in the heavenly temple (M'nachot 110a). The Tosafot, medieval commentators on the Talmud, said about this passage that this sacrifice consists of the souls of the righteous, of *Torah*-scholars.

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been put to death for proclaiming the Word of God, that is, for bearing witness. This seal is different from the first four seals in that it does not present the action itself but, rather, the result of the action. Yochanan does not witness how believers are killed, only that they unquestionably experience horrible death. When

¹ Jewish New Testament Commentary.

Yochanan sees these martyrs, they are already under the altar. They are safe and secure protected by the Lamb Himself. Oliver Greene writes about these people: ²

John did not see these martyrs in life. He did not witness the brutality of their persecution and martyrdom. It is all over when he sees them "underneath the altar." He hears them cry with a loud voice, "How long?" This cry is well known among the suffering Jews, and will be better known during the coming hour of unparalleled sorrow and persecution upon the Jews. Read carefully Psalm 74:9-10; Psalm 79:5; Psalm 89:46; Psalm 94:3-4. The appeal of these martyrs is to God. They are crying to the sovereign ruler of all creation - the One who has the right and the power to avenge the bloodshed by the enemies of Jehovah God. These martyrs are crying out to God to pour out vengeance "upon them that dwell upon the earth." God does not answer by pouring out vengeance at that moment. Their cry for vengeance is heard, but the answer is delayed.

The idea of heaven being God's temple is a theme of Scripture (Habakkuk 2:20) and will be developed later in the book (Revelation 11:19; 15:5; 16:17). The altar is not identified as to whether it is the brazen altar or the golden altar of incense, but the mention of **blood** in the cry of the martyrs as well as the expression **under the altar** point to it being the brazen altar. Yochanan's eye is drawn to the very place where the blood of the sacrificial animals would have been poured out (Exodus 29:12; Lev 4:7), **underneath the altar**.

The pouring out of the blood indicated the completion of the sacrifice and signified that a life was poured out (Leviticus 17:11). Instead of blood Yochanan sees **souls** and the fact that they were **underneath the altar** is a figurative way of saying that from heaven's viewpoint their untimely deaths are a sacrifice upon God's altar.

These saints had died because the **Word of God**; in the context, this means their adherence to its truth; and because their testimony. What men had done to **Yeshua** they had done to those who had remained faithful to the testimony received from Him.

These martyrs must have been put to death in the period between the rapture of the church and the midpoint of the tribulation period, specifically in the first three and a half years of that period. Individuals who, because of their obedience to the **Word of God** and their faithfulness to **Yeshua**, will not accept the creed of the great deceiver, will suffer persecution and death. It is the souls of these martyrs that are seen by Yochanan under the altar. How these became believers will be seen in chapter 7.

They cried out in a loud voice, "Sovereign Ruler, HaKadosh [the Holy One], the True One, how long will it be before you judge the people living on earth and avenge our blood?" There is no doubt that these martyrs belong to the first half of the tribulation period. Confirmation of this conclusion comes from the content of the prayer. The cry of Stephen, the first martyr of the church, was, ***"Lord! Do not hold this sin against them!"*** (Acts 7:60).; a prayer-cry on the pattern of the Lord Himself who prayed, ***"Father, forgive them; they don't understand what they are doing"*** Luke 23:34 (CJB). During the church age these very cries have echoed again and again. The cry here is far different. It calls for immediate vengeance. The blood of these martyrs, like the blood of righteous Abel (Genesis 4:10), cries in the ear of the One called **holy and true**.

Holiness and truth found in this Sovereign Lord demand vindication and vengeance. Untainted by evil He will not permit unrighteousness to go unjudged no matter how long His patience with men waits. Heaven's response shows both perfect sympathy with their longings and a readiness to act on their behalf when the moment is ripe. Their blood will be avenged.

² A Layman's Commentary on Revelation.

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 should be reached, of their brothers who would be killed, just as they had been. In answer to this cry heaven gives two things. The first is a *symbol* of reassurance ~ **a white robe**. **White** when used symbolically of garments, draws attention to two things: the purity acceptable to God (Revelation 3:4; 7:9; 19:8, 14) and the blessedness enjoyed by the saint. Their bloodstained garments on earth reflected earth's assessment of their testimony, now heaven displays its appreciation; they are acceptable to heaven.

There is also given to these martyrs a definite **word** of reassurance. The word of reassurance lies in the truth that the delay was almost over. Vindication was sure and the interval was **a little longer**. In this context, the **little longer** is the last three and half years of the tribulation until the company of martyrs would be complete.

In this final three and a half years of the tribulation called the **Great Tribulation** (7:14), many saints will die as martyrs; "the beast out of the sea" (13:1) will "make war with the saints and ... overcome them" (13:7); "the beast out of the earth" (13:11) will demand that "as many as would not worship the image of the [first] beast should be killed" (13:15). Persecution will reach a climax and multitudes will die for their faith in the Messiah. To be identified with Yeshua or His brethren will mean instant death (Matt 25:34-40), so that martyrdom will become commonplace. These will be the **fellow-servants** and the **brothers** for whom this martyr company must wait. Serving the same Sovereign Master and born into the same family, it is only fitting that heaven will avenge them all at the same moment. The last saint put to death in the **Great Tribulation** will mark the full quota of those to seal their testimony in blood. Then heaven acts; **Yeshua** returns to earth and righteous judgment is executed on the earth-dwellers.

Special Comparative Note on Chapter 6:9-11 ³

Historicist Approach:

Most **Historicist** interpreters take this passage to be the ordeal of the church under Diocletian, whose reign began in 284 but who did not begin to persecute Christians until 303 CE.

Preterist Approach:

The fact that the martyrs are asking for the avenging of their blood upon **the people living on earth** suggests that their persecutors were still alive on earth at the time Yochanan saw the vision. Prior to 70 CE, the main persecutors of the righteous Believers were the leaders of the Jewish nation. The destruction of Jerusalem in that generation was the sentence of the divine Judge in response to the cries of the blood of the righteous ones slain by her leaders.

Futurist Approach:

Most **Futurists** view this passage as describing post-rapture saints martyred for their faith during the Tribulation period.

Idealist Approach:

Idealists see this vision revealing the present state of all the saints who have already died for their faith.

In my next post, we will take a brief break from unpacking the **Book of Revelation** to observe **Pesach** (Passover).

³ Material in this section is taken from "Revelation: Four Views, Revised & Updated" by Steve Gregg