

Lesson # 23 The Fifth Seal Judgment

Revelation 6:9-11

Date: October 3, 2010

⁹When 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. ¹⁰They 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?" ¹¹Then 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.

I. Martyrdom in the Tribulation v. 9

The 5th Seal differs greatly from the first 4. There is no call from any of the 4 Living Creatures for it to "come"; there is no horse & rider; there is no action depicted as occurring on the earth; but rather we are shown the result of action that has been going on, and which by inference is continuing. This seal judgment is also different from the 6th & 7th as well.

Martyrdom often follows political, socio – economic disasters, and is virtually always associated with powerful & corrupt dictators, which the first 4 seals brought about. This also follows the parallel of **Matt. 24:9**. Obviously, the actual martyrdom of God's saints is not a judgment of God, but is instead is a sort of fuel as those who murdered these people who now cry out for vengeance have added to their storehouse of wrath when God judges them at the GWT. ①

One of the first points we need to see here is that the presence of these souls in heaven 'under the altar', confirms that people will be saved during the Tribulation. Since the Rapture precedes the Tribulation, there will be no real believers left behind – only the wicked lost, along with those who had professed to be believers. There are now martyred souls of believers in great enough numbers to declare this a seal judgment, speaks volumes about the scope of the salvation & the intensity of the Holocaust-like persecution in the Tribulation and provides a strong argument against those who think no one gets saved after the Rapture.

Some postulate that these martyred souls are the souls of all those slain for the cause of Christ over the course of the entire history of the world, but I find that does not fit the context of this passage, which seems to be distinctly associated with only the Tribulation.

This seal also precedes the sealing of 144,000 Jewish evangelists in Rev. 7:1-8, so many of these people were likely saved during the Tribulation because they had been the fringe "Christians" in name only who inhabits the churches even today. They may have understood the gospel, and attended church regularly, but never

accepted Christ...and then the Rapture came! The Rapture will be a mighty wake-up call for repentance on the part of millions of people, only now, repentance and belief will come with a much higher personal cost, and immediate, great physical danger.

This also speaks of the fact that the passage in **II Thess. 2:6-8** cannot mean the complete removal of the Holy Spirit from the world because the means of salvation has never changed and will not change in the Tribulation. Only the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit will have ended, while the regeneration of souls so that they can exercise faith in Christ and repentance will still go on.

I cannot be in more disagreement with Donald G. Barnhouse, who comments; *“Though these people will not be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, since the day of the church will be over, they will nevertheless bear testimony to the truth of God’s words.”*ⁱ Since this 7 year period will likely be the most prolific time of salvation in history, it hardly makes sense for God to now change His salvation plan to accommodate a misinterpreted reading of a couple of verses in II Thessalonians! The Holy Spirit has always had an integral role in bringing people to salvation in Christ.

In what sense are these souls “under the altar”, and which altar is this referring to? This scene obviously takes place in heaven, not on earth, so this must be in God’s Temple – the throne room was now seen to be a temple, a combination seen throughout Scriptureⁱⁱ, but which altar? The Altar of Burnt Offering or the Altar of Incense? Or both? ②

If we identify this altar with the Burnt Offerings, we run into interpretive issues almost immediately. The sacrifice was laid on top & the blood was poured out into the bottom of the altar, but here it is the souls under the altar, not on top. The parallelism is off. This altar was also used as a sacrifice for redemption, but Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice eliminated the need for this, leaving us to look at the Altar of Incense.

It is more likely that this is the altar being referred to, and in fact, in Rev. 8:3,5; 14:17-18; it is called “the Altar”. Throughout Revelation, this altar is connected with the execution of judgment – the very things these souls pray for here, and the prayers of the saints are symbolized by incense – 5:8; 8:3,4. This altar is in heaven, the one after which the earthly version had been patterned – Ex. 30:1-10; 25:9,40. This altar in heaven would be huge, and so souls gathered under it seems plausible, especially since they are spirits, not yet having received their mortal bodies.

We are told that they did not die natural deaths, but were martyred “for the word of God and for the witness they had borne”. Although many will survive the Tribulation after having been saved (those who will populate the Millennial Kingdom – cf. **Matt. 25: 31-40**), many others will be killed during the Tribulation, and many of these will die as martyrs, or indirectly as a result of

persecution. Refusing to take the Mark of the Beast will immediately place them in harm's way, as the Antichrist uses this method (whatever it is) to nail down who will be loyal to him, and who will refuse to worship him. Believers who are faithful to Christ will be exposed and thus identified as enemies of the state and worthy only of death.

II. Their Cry & Their Questions v. 10

This group cries out, seemingly with one loud voice & the Greek indicates this was not a chant or repetitive action, but 1 instance and 1 voice of unity only is described. There is no charity or a request for grace & forgiveness here for their murderers – as we observed as Christ was crucified and Stephen was martyred in Acts 8. This cry is more akin to the imprecatory psalms like Ps. 74:9-10. We should not find that strange however.

Notice what D.A. Carson says in his book, “Love in Hard Places”;

“In Revelation 6:10, we find Christian martyrs, those who are “under the altar” in John’s vision and “who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained”, calling out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy & true, until You judge the inhabitants of the earth & avenge our blood?” Each is then given a white robe and told to wait a little longer until the number of martyrs is complete. Where is the Christian forgiveness in this vignette? Clearly, it isn’t there. But before we become too critical, we should remember that all parties in the Book of Revelation know that the final judgment is not only inevitable, but just. These martyred believers ③ are not, after all, looking to exact personal vengeance; they remember the biblical instruction that vengeance belongs to the Lord (eg. Rom. 12:17-30), which is why they address their prayer to Him. They know full well that the Lord’s irrevocable vengeance is on its way; they know that justice will be done, and will be seen to be done. Their prayer is that it might come sooner rather than later.

After all, Christians have been taught by the bible, both Old & New Testaments, that God is a God of justice. And justice demands that those who are not fully found under the forgiveness paid for by Christ’s death face the just recompense of their defiance of God. That too, is part of the picture when we pray as Jesus taught us: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10).”ⁱⁱⁱ

Robert Thomas also quotes Lenski here; *“When grace has exhausted it’s longsuffering, only judgment is left and prayers for righteous retribution are appropriate.”^{iv}*

Notice the object of their appeal in v.10 – “O Sovereign Lord, holy & true”. He is the One in complete control and these souls know that. He could avenge them now if He chose, in fact, He could have prevented their deaths completely. However, this is all part of His plan of redemption, worked out & decreed before the foundation of the world. His purposes have not yet run their full course at this particular time.

They call Him holy & true, acknowledging that their request is just a request – that he is the One who has pre-eminence, and only His decision will be just & righteous. Turn with me to **Ps. 22:1-5; 22:24-31**. In this prophetic Messianic Psalm, Christ is the One crying out and note the interplay between v. 2 & v. 5, which sort of parallels our text. They cry out, express their desire, but acquiesce to the Sovereign God on whose shoulders rests the outcome of His decision to save or to judge the wicked. Notice also **Lamentations 3:52-66** where a similar sentiment is raised.

The phrase “those who dwell on the earth” is found a number of times in Revelation – 3:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8,12; 17:2,8. It denotes those who are hostile to God on earth during the Tribulation. The whole race is in full rebellion against God & they will kill every believer they can get their hands on to spite God.

III. The Answer v. 11

The fact that these martyrs are given a white robe has a couple of points worth pursuing. Since this is just occurring now, I think this mass of people’s souls has just arrived in heaven at this time en masse. Their first act upon arrival under the altar is to ask their question, and the white robe is the first gift/reward given to them in heaven.

Now, remember, these are souls (v. 9), not believers in eternal, glorified bodies, and so we wonder, “How can a soul wear a robe?” Yet, they do. In fact, cf. **Rev. 7:9c, 13-14**. The robe in Greek is “*stole*” – a robe of state which flowed to one’s feet and is a reward of grace, an honour bestowed on the faithful. It’s white colour is reminiscent of purity & holiness alongside radiant beauty. These are souls (spirits) not bodies, because bodies are not resurrected until Rev. 20:4-5. Perhaps souls have more substance than we think. ④

They are told they should rest a little longer, not to stifle their cry or rebuke them for their impatience, but to tell them to enjoy the rest they have been given – to leave the time of the vengeance to God. They are graciously told it will be a little while so they will not have to wait long. Those who interpret Revelation as a historic event (Preterists), must interpret this little while as thousands of years because they say these martyrs are not from the Tribulation but from around AD 98 or so, but that would make a mockery of God’s promise here. They do the very thing they accuse Dispensationalists of doing in Rev. 1:1, but their interpretation is a matter of convenience for their position.

When we compare this verse to Rev. 12:12 (Satan’s time is short) we see that the timing of the vengeance and the demise of Satan will coincide. When he is bound, the Millennial Kingdom will commence – not many years away from this seal judgment.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of this answer to these souls is the reason given for the delay in judgment, and vengeance. Note v. 11b – “until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.” – The astounding, eye-popping reply indicates that the vengeance will not be complete until the number of God’s foreordained martyrs (at that moment still alive on earth) has been killed. We see glimpses of this truth in other places in Scripture too – **Matt. 23:29-32; II Pet. 3:8-10; Rom. 9:22-23**.

IV. What Does this Passage Tell us About Intermediate Heaven?

This brief, 3 verse glimpse into the Intermediate heaven (the final, eternal heavenly state is not instituted until Rev. 21, after the Millennium & the Great White Throne Judgment) gives us some insight into the interaction between the souls in heaven & God. We can learn a number of things from this passage, and of course, it also presents a number of questions that we probably can't answer until we get there.

Randy Alcorn, in his excellent book, "Heaven"^v, addresses this passage and points out 21 things he has gleaned from it. I will not list all 21, but I have laid out the most important ones he mentions for us to look at.

1. When these people died, their souls went to heaven, and apparently immediately. V.9
2. Their identity did not change – their personal history is intact – there is continuity, they are the same people in heaven that they were on earth. V. 9
3. They are known for what they did on earth – “slain because...their testimony they had maintained.” V. 9
4. Though they are “souls” (v. 9) they can call out to express themselves (v. 10) so there is rational communication possible.
5. They are conscious (no soul sleep) and aware of one another (“our blood”) of God, and of the situation on earth.
6. They ask God to intervene on their behalf. V. 10
7. They have an audience with God & the ability to learn. They ask a question, and expect an answer which will give them information they did not have before.
8. They are aware of at least something occurring on the earth – they know that their murderers have not yet been judged. V. 10
9. They are passionate for justice and for God to avenge them, even though martyrdom has brought them to heaven. ⑤
10. They recall their lives on earth & know that they were murdered.
11. They recognize God's attributes – “Sovereign Lord, holy & true...” – so His judgment of sin is expected and understood – v. 10.
12. They are distinct individuals – each one is given a white robe – v. 11 – so identity is retained.
13. God answers their question so they will have questions, and will get answers. We will be able to learn in heaven.
14. They are told to “wait a little longer”, so we anticipate fulfillment of God's future promises in heaven. Intermediate heaven will co-exist with and oversee earth's sin & suffering.
15. There is still time in intermediate heaven. – vv. 10-11 – “How long?”... and God answers “Wait” – these words require that time pass.
16. Those in heaven have relationships they are familiar with on earth – “fellow servants & brothers” – v. 11 – one family of God in 2 places.
17. God knows down to the last detail all that occurs & will occur on earth – v. 11. The Voice of the Martyrs estimates that approximately 150,000 Christians per year are being martyred, and our God knows each one by name, their number, when and how they will die, who will be responsible and when that last one dies, when the last elect person is saved, Christ will return, and not one minute before that.

Summary

God has determined in eternity past (Eph. 1:11) whom He would save; where and when they would live & die (Acts 17: 26); what their role in His history would be; the extent of their lives (Ps. 139); and certainly how they would die. When the last one of God's elect is saved, and that last believer gives his / her life for Christ, the heavens will open and Revelation 19 will at last be reality. Even so, come Lord Jesus! (Maranatha)

Next lesson – Lesson # 24
Rev. 6: 12-17...The 6th Seal Judgment

ⁱ Donald Gray Barnhouse; Revelation-An Expository Commentary; Zondervan; 1971; reprint 1977;lp. 131

ⁱⁱ Ps. 11:4; 29:9-10; Isa. 6:1 – cf. Robert Thomas, Revelation 1-7; p. 441

ⁱⁱⁱ D.A. Carson; Love in Hard Places; Crossway Books; 2002; p. 83

^{iv} Robert Thomas; Romans 1-7; p. 445

^v Randy Alcorn, Heaven, Tyndale, 2004; pp. 65-67. All the points listed here are from that book, although I have reworded many of them.