

*Charts: The Tribulation: Chart #9*

## PREFACE

With the opening of the fifth seal we leave behind the four horses and their riders. What the first four seals had in common was that something in heaven was inflicted upon the earth. The breaking of each seal released upon the inhabitants of earth, in turn, Antichrist, War, Famine, and Death—each being the logical result of the previous.

The scene that is revealed in vision to John when the fifth seal is broken is reversed from the first four: the vision shows *in heaven* the result of what happened *on earth*—specifically, martyrs for the “word of God” and their “testimony.”

## THE FIFTH SEAL: MARTYRS (REVELATION 6:9-11)

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.

We must remind ourselves that a prophetic vision (“I saw”) is not unlike some of our nocturnal dreams and imaginings, wherein things described may not be as they seem. *We have dreams in which we are around people we know—yet in appearance we have never seen them before. In our dreams we are in a house that is clearly ours—yet looks nothing like the house in which we currently dwell.* In some instances the imagery in biblical prophecy can be taken as literal; for example, there will indeed be vast numbers of people killed by war and famine and the beasts of the earth as a result of the fourth seal being broken in heaven. Very often, however, the imagery is to be seen as *metaphorical, representative, or allegorical*. For example, John describes the effects of the sixth seal being broken (vv12-14) as “the whole moon became like blood,” “the stars of the sky fell to the earth,” “the sky was split apart [or ‘vanished’ (ESV)] like a scroll when it is rolled up.” The tone of that passage seems to be one of the apostle struggling for ways to describe supernatural events to mere earthlings—not least, himself.

John sees an “altar” in heaven. Some say this is the golden altar of incense; some say it is the brazen altar of sacrifice. I’m not sure it matters that much; which altar it is is the least of our considerations.

John reports that “underneath” the altar he sees “the souls of those who had been slain.” Why were they slain? Because they maintained an allegiance to and a determined testimony, even in the face of death, for “the word of God.” Some say these represent *all* the saints ever martyred for Christ, but there are clues embedded in these three verses that lead us to conclude that these are those who have been martyred—thus far—during the Tribulation:

- The text of v10 would indicate that those who persecuted and killed these martyrs are still alive on earth: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood *on those who dwell on the earth?*” (emphasis added)
- If this group included Christian martyrs from all time (i.e., not just the Tribulation), then that would not track with the events of the Rapture, in which all previous martyrs would have been resurrected and now be happily with the Lord in glorified bodies. These martyrs are not yet glorified, but seem to be held in the same state in which believers would find themselves who have died prior to the Rapture: “souls” (*psychas*) of those killed.

*Alan F. Johnson:* This is generally understood to mean the disembodied souls of these saints. However, the Greek word (*psyche*) has several meanings and probably stands here for the actual “lives” or persons who are very much alive though they have been killed [probably] by the beast.

*Walvoord:* Scholars have been divided as to whether saints who die receive temporary bodies in heaven prior to the resurrection body, or whether only their spiritual beings are in heaven before the resurrection. In this verse there is a contribution to an answer to this question. The martyred dead here pictured have not been raised from the dead and have not received their resurrection bodies. Yet it is declared that they are given robes. The fact that they are given robes would almost demand that they have a body of some kind. A robe could not hang upon an immaterial soul or spirit. It is not the kind of body that Christians now have, that is, the body of earth; nor is it the resurrection body of flesh and bones of which Christ spoke after His own resurrection. It is a temporary body suited for their presence in heaven but replaced in turn by their everlasting resurrection body given at the time of Christ’s return.

I would add to this that they obviously also have voices with which to communicate. If they have not yet been resurrected and glorified, when will they be? Answer: When Christ returns at the end of the Tribulation and prior to the Millennium.

## **Read Revelation 20:4-6.**

**By the way:** Note here that the *thousand*-year Millennium is covered in less than four *verses*, while the *seven*-year Tribulation takes up *fourteen* chapters. I take that to mean that God's priority in communicating to John, and thus to any readers of His word in The Revelation, is less the wonder and glory of one thousand years under the righteous King, than the wrath and pain and suffering inflicted upon an unrighteous kingdom under the rule of Satan. The predominate message of The Revelation is expressed by the writer to the Hebrews, [citing Deuteronomy 32:35-36](#),  
For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:30-31)

An initial reading of vv9-11 may evoke an image of struggling figures pinned down beneath a heavy stone or metal sacrificial altar. Once again, this is a prophetic vision—not a literal narrative. [Turn please to Leviticus 4](#). The scene in these verses, though bizarre, harkens back to Yahweh's instructions to Israel regarding its sacrifices.

### **Read Leviticus 4:5-7.**

There in v7 is the connection. In imitation of their Lord and Savior, these martyrs have shed their own blood out of their obedience and devotion to God's word. It is likely these are the ones spoken of in Revelation 13:15 who are killed because they refused to "worship the image of the beast." An even closer connection would be with the martyrs in Revelation 7:14, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Interestingly, in v10 they refer to God not as *adonai*, but *despotes* ([from which we get the word "despot"](#)). *Despotes* means an absolute ruler, and implies ownership. (The ESV and NIVs add "Sovereign" to make the point.)

Just as the psalmists, these martyrs are calling out for God's justice—for Him to do as He promised: "...and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" Note the admixture of imagery in this scene:

- John describes them as "souls," but whatever their form, they represent the blood they have shed for the Lord God, for they are "underneath" (at the bottom of) the altar, just as the sacrificial blood was poured out at the base of the altar.
- Just as the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God, was poured out upon the soil at the base of the cross, and, as in Hebrews, once for all upon the tabernacle altar ([Hebrews 9:11-14](#)).

- So it is, as it were, the martyrs' blood itself crying out for God's vengeance. This is not new imagery; indeed, it points back to the very first family on earth.

### Read Genesis 4:8-11.

The blood that gives life to flesh is important in God's economy. He places great emphasis on it. Also in Genesis He told Noah,

And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. (Genesis 9:5-6)

In v11 we have the Lord's answer to the plea of the martyrs. Each of them is given a white robe—which, as mentioned before, seems to indicate that they have some sort of body, probably temporary, upon which to drape the robe. The white robe is a sign of righteousness (also 7:9, 13-14). I would place it in the same category as the “crowns” believers will be given, that is, a reward, a sign of the Lord God's approval.

Nonetheless the martyrs' pleading request will not be immediately granted. God stands by His promises to His people, but He does *not* promise that it will be immediate. They are told that “they should rest” for a little while longer. *Anapausontai* means to give intermission from labor, to remain quiet. How long? “...until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.”

Sovereign indeed. Here we have evidence for the omniscient, omnipotent hand of God. He knows the precise number of those who will be martyred in His name during the Tribulation, and to this early group he says that that number has not yet been reached. There are two things going on here: First, God *knows* the number, but, second, God *wants* the number.

To the misguided minions of this fallen world this is not the behavior of a “loving God.” But it is; God loves justice and righteousness, and the Eschaton is all about a just, righteous God demonstrating His sovereign rule over all things. We cannot in the same breath call Him “sovereign” or *despotes*, absolute ruler, then question His judgments.

This means that God’s tangible response to the plea for vengeance from these martyrs will have to wait until at least the end of the Tribulation—the return of Christ in judgment—or perhaps even until the Great White Throne judgment after the Millennium.

During the Tribulation there will be a price to be paid for being a Christian. At that time it will be very much as it was in the thirties and forties in German-occupied Europe. Then if you were a Jew, even nominally, it didn’t matter who or what else you were: even just a small measure of Jewish blood was sufficient for you to be carted off to a camp, and in most cases, certain death.

Christians, those who convert after the Rapture, will suffer much the same fate under the rule of Antichrist as the Jews did under Hitler. Although the text is not explicit, we conclude these martyrs are Christians—slaughtered for their faith in Christ Jesus—because the Tribulation is intentionally a time of God’s wrath focused on Israel; any Jews who reject Christ will suffer the wrath of God and be consigned to the lake of fire; they certainly will not be receiving His reward and consolation.

Earlier in this study we looked at the various dispensations ([Charts #2 & 3](#)). Here in the scene from the fifth seal we have evidence that God’s economy is now passing through a different dispensation from which we have dwelt since the time of Christ on earth. Note once again the entreaty of the Martyrs under the altar: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

From the cross Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Stephen prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). But the prayer of these martyrs is, to put it in our contemporary vernacular, “Sic ’em, God!”

Heaven deals differently with sin during the different dispensations. During the OT era, *law* was the principle on which God dealt with wicked men. *Grace* is the principle of our present dispensation. But in the narrative of the Last Things, sin will no longer be addressed by the principle of grace; then the active principle will be *judgment* and *wrath* against the wicked (Oliver B. Greene).

Never forget that it is only *by* God’s grace that we who are alive now live during the dispensation of, and are governed by Him under the principle of... grace. At some point in the future, that will end.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (2 Peter 3:9-10)