

Revelation 6:9-11 – The Martyrs of the Lamb

This is the fifth seal opened by the Lamb. Under the first four, we saw the four horsemen of the Apocalypse ride out, beginning at the time when Revelation was written, in the year 96AD, bringing an era of prosperity followed by a century of civil wars, beginning in 180AD, followed by financial oppression and a ruined economy beginning in 212, followed by death by famine, disease, war, and wild animals, devastating the once great empire starting in the year 248. For a while, all three horsemen wreaked havoc together, until the late 200's. The empire was now in ruins, and finally in the year 293, it was carved up into four pieces. The Lamb was judging Rome, but Rome did not repent. So suddenly in John's vision, the scene shifted from four Roman horses to one Israelite altar. This is a symbol, belonging to a whole set of symbols that have to do with the Church of Jesus Christ, the new, spiritual Temple, with Jesus Christ as our High Priest introduced in chapter 1. The symbols of the Temple and its ceremonies stand for the Church and its worship.ⁱ This change in scenery is a change in topic: from predicting the condition of the Roman Empire to the condition of Christian Churches in the empire at the end of the third century.

The Fifth Seal

When the Lamb opens the fifth seal, just as the first four seals unleashed four horsemen on the Roman Empire in sequence, the fifth is a prediction of an era that begins sometime after the arrival of the pale horse. Notice in verse 9 that John's focus is not drawn to the **altar** in the scene, but to the **souls** under the altar. [read v9] If you've heard of Charles Spurgeon, well, the commentary on Revelation that Spurgeon gave his highest recommendation, was a four-volume set by a man named Elliott.ⁱⁱ I share this to add a little weight to this quote from Elliott as you hear it: At the opening of the fifth seal, Elliott writes, "...the scene now depicted in the altar-court was one not of living worshippers, but dead; the voice heard one, not of ...praise, but of suffering."ⁱⁱⁱ We should feel the significance of this in our bones. Was there a revival in Christian churches? Was the Gospel being preached from the pulpits of churches? Were believers gathering for worship? No. They were dead. That is the general condition of the church represented in the symbol: John sees a symbol depicting souls of people who had been killed--martyred in fact. It predicts a persecution of such force that the only description here of the condition of the public witness and public worship of believers living in the Roman Empire is to show them as dead. It does not mean that every Christian had been slain, but that so many had that in a general sense, the Church had been crushed. So it would seem that in Rome's divided territories, enough strength remained, or had returned, in order to systematically hunt and kill Christians. Who was responsible for killing so many Christians? [read v10] ..."those who dwell upon the earth". That is, the rulers and inhabitants of the land of the Roman Empire. Verse 9 also says why they were killed: on account of "the Word of God, and the witness they had borne". The English language to this day contains a sad memorial to the suffering of the early Christians, in that our word "martyr" comes from the word in verse 9, "witness".^{iv} Witnesses of what? In chapter 1:9, the Apostle John says he was imprisoned "on account of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus." These martyrs were "the Lamb's" witnesses, (most Greek mss even say, "the Word of God and the testimony of the Lamb").^v The picture isn't of tranquil, spiritual mystics, or of culturally respectable, but nominal Christ-followers. The symbols John saw refer to people who loved the Lamb more than their own lives.

The bronze altar

Before we move on, let me say a few words about the **altar** itself. It is a symbol taken from the Temple in Jerusalem, but in the Temple and the Tabernacle before it, there were two altars: one of gold for burning incense inside the holy place, and one of bronze for burning animal sacrifices in the court, just outside the tent or Temple itself. The one under the fifth seal is the bronze altar of burnt offerings (most altar references in Revelation are to the golden altar of incense). There are two reasons we can be sure about this: 1) From chapters 4 through 5, John was shown the symbols connected to the Holy of Holies first, then moved outward from there to the outer court with the "sea of glass" (4:6), and the living creatures. The bronze altar was in the outer court, not inside the Temple. 2) The symbol John sees here pictures the souls of the martyrs "at the base" of the altar (the Greek word for "under" means lower down, not really underneath).^{vi} In the symbolism of the scene, then, the souls of the martyrs are lying at the base of the bronze altar where the blood used to be poured out. That's the imagery. The reason it matters so much which altar this is, is because if this is right, that these souls are pictured as "poured out" like blood at the base of the bronze altar, it is an Old Testament image full of wonderful meaning for Christians struggling under the worst kinds of suffering.

Go back with me to God's original instructions for a sin offering using the bronze altar [**read** Lev 4:4-7]. Now in the Temple John saw in his vision, there is only one sacrifice that was slain and accepted by God. What was that sacrifice? [**read** 5:6a] Just like in Leviticus 4, the implication is that the blood of the Lamb was taken and sprinkled in the holy place, on the gold altar of incense--that is, the blood of Christ made His whole Church clean and holy to God. You and I, who believe in Christ, and those Christians persecuted in the Roman Empire at the end of the 3rd century, we are not made holy by our own good works, or by giving our lives for God. Our lives are *made holy* by Christ who died for us. His blood makes us clean. So then, why does it matter if the martyrs' souls were poured out like the blood? In the Old Testament system, the High Priest poured the blood out at the foot of the bronze altar when it was more than he needed for the ritual cleansing. It was the left-over blood. But it was holy to God, so they couldn't allow it to be discarded or dumped anywhere! The promise of forgiveness depended on God accepting the death of the sacrifice in the place of the deaths of sinners. You don't trample on the blood God accepts, the blood that saves your soul. So the priests worshipfully and thankfully poured the rest of the blood at the base of the altar where atonement was made. Now, in this New Testament prophecy, John sees it was the Lamb, Jesus who died and it is His blood that covers our guilt. But in the fifth seal, God shows forgiven Christians that their deaths are also offerings united with the Lamb's death.^{vii} So their deaths are holy, precious, and cherished by Him for the sake of the Lamb who gave His life to save them. Not tossed aside; treasured. Not abandoned; beloved. That's why God showed John the souls at the base of the altar.

I'll bet every one of us has suffered through times when we doubted whether God could accept us, could love us, could forgive us? Times when the stink of our own guilt was so strong we felt like surely God smells it too. We could never forgive ourselves, so why would God? And when we endure dark times, we are so much more prone to despair, to self-doubt, to forget the love of God that once was almost tangible. When these souls were martyred, when it seemed all worship was silenced, and their testimony seemed to make no difference to those people who persecuted them, to those who dwelled upon the earth, wouldn't they have felt like even God had abandoned them? They needed the hope John wrote about here: they had been cleansed already by the blood of the Lamb, made acceptable to God through Him--as Peter says, "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pe 2:5).

This is a prophecy of reassurance then, that their deaths were precious in God's sight--poured out for the glory of the Lamb at the foot of His altar--laid down in worship of Christ at the foot of His cross. The Lamb died for you and me too, so if you depend on the atonement He made, the forgiveness He offers, and follow Him, become His disciple, He will glorify God through your life, and even your death, when it comes, will not be for nothing. You need to understand books like Leviticus to understand a book like Revelation. But see how practical it becomes?

The voice of the martyrs

And that leads to the big question: If the deaths of those martyrs were holy to God, and cherished for the glory of Christ, how can God let their killers get away with it? Once understood, these facts demand that God respond. That's why, in the symbolism of this prophecy, the blood of the martyrs "cry out with a loud voice". [read v10] The great Cambridge scholar, Joseph Mede, explained the "loud cry" as drawing attention to the extreme cruelty the martyrs suffered.^{viii} When the worst evils go unpunished, the voices of its victims raise the loudest cries for justice. Notice three things: What they say about God, What their deaths demand, Who they blame.

What do they say about God? [read] God is *sovereign*. God is *holy*. God is *true*. The Scriptures reveal this about God over and over again. The word for "sovereign Lord" means, "one who holds complete power or authority over another".^{ix} It matches the word "servant" (lit. slave) in verse 11. These martyrs knew that God held absolute power and authority over them. *What do their deaths demand?* The souls of the martyrs are not asking for an explanation. The fact that they were killed because of faith in Christ even though Christ had already died for them is moral outrage that demands an answer. Their deaths raise a serious tension, a gross injustice on the scales of divine justice. The Greek literally reads, "...you are continuing to not judge or vindicate our blood...". It is not even technically a question. It is just a fact, that once we notice it, becomes an urgent question of cosmic importance: "How can God go on allowing this?!" The weight of the words is on the worry that God seems to be doing nothing to stop the injustice. *Who do they blame?* The voices of the souls don't blame God. **They exonerate God** when they describe Him as "sovereign, holy, and true". They blame, "those who dwell on the earth". And since, as we've seen already in Revelation, "the earth" is a symbol for the Roman Empire, this means the inhabitants of the Roman Empire are responsible for their deaths. But God is responsible to make it right. And according to Revelation, the evil-doers will pay. But not quite yet.

The Era of Martyrs

In AD 293, in order to save the empire from complete collapse, Diocletian divided it into four smaller empires under four governments. It worked. Ten years later, he re-unified the empire under one emperor, himself, and celebrated his triumph in Rome. He had succeeded in securing Rome's borders, rebuilding the government bureaucracy bigger and stronger than ever, and stabilizing tax revenue.^x His next goal was to destroy people who no longer worshipped the old gods. On the 24th of February 303, Diocletian published "the Edict against the Christians", making it illegal for Christians to gather for worship, and began destroying churches and burning the Scriptures, throughout the Empire.^{xi} Through most of the following decade, Christians were persecuted in an attempt to abolish even the name "Christianity" from the lands of the empire.^{xii} Other persecutions had come and gone before this. But this one is infamous in history. Christians used to measure the whole calendar system from the date of that edict, calling it "the Era of Martyrs".^{xiii} Today we only use the AD (Anno Domini) system for our calendars because it was invented by a 6th century monk who no longer wanted to commemorate an

emperor who murdered Christians.^{xiv} Diocletian's attempts to exterminate Christianity were so brutal, he thought he had succeeded and raised monuments to celebrate the eradication of Christianity.^{xv} Four edicts altogether targeted first church buildings and books, then clergy, and finally laity.^{xvi} One of Augustine's students later wrote that in the province of Egypt alone, more than 140,000 Christians were killed.^{xvii} An ancient historian named Sulpicius Severus wrote, "Almost all the world was stained with the sacred blood of martyrs, ...The world was never more drained of blood by any wars, nor did the Church...ever conquer with a greater triumph, than when it could not be overcome with the slaughters of ten years."^{xviii} The anti-Christian prejudice that began in New Testament times among the regular population (e.g., Acts 19:23-27), reached its highest flame with Diocletian, the Emperor. So the voices of the martyrs blame the inhabitants of the empire—"those who dwell on the Earth" altogether. And Elliott even quotes one of the martyrs of that time, to show that whereas previous generations of martyrs died with joy, after so much slaughter, the mood in the Church was now one of warning the people of the Empire about the coming judgement of God: a martyr named Marianus "...in particular foretold the vengeance which was being prepared by God for those who were shedding the blood of the guiltless."^{xix} God's vengeance was still to come.

Now as I explained about the first 4 seals, the Old Testament context of the four horsemen comes from Zechariah 1. When you love someone, you recognize their face even in a crowd. That's how it is when we start to love the One who intercedes for the Jewish people in Zech 1:12 [read]. 500 years later, when He died on a Roman cross saying, "Father forgive them...", those who loved Him recognized His face. After He was raised from the dead, and ascended to the throne of God, and after John wrote Revelation, when persecuted Christians read about the Lamb opening the seals of judgement upon the Roman Empire, they recognized His face again. So when the prayer of the martyrs in verse 10 reads like an echo of the prayer of our great High Priest in Zechariah 1:12, and we hear them declare that He is sovereign, holy, and true, even in their suffering, we the readers recognize His portrait in their words. They are really praying an "Amen" to His prayer—they are praying that He will reveal Himself and set right all that is so wrong.

[read v11] They are given white robes to show, to affirm, to prove to all who read this, to the generation of Christians who follow them, and even as an encouragement beforehand to the martyrs themselves when they happened to hear, and read, and be blessed by the words of this prophecy, that since Jesus died for their souls, there is no power on earth, or in heaven, or in hell, or in all Creation; there is no sin so great, or failure so complete, or enemy so powerful, no, there is nothing that can separate them from the love of Christ Jesus for the people He has redeemed.^{xx} How can we be sure? Because the One who prayed for His people in Zechariah 1, is the One who died; more than that, is the One who now rules all things at the right hand of Him who is seated on the throne, the Lamb who holds the scroll. The white robes they are given prove that they are holy to Him, cleansed by Him, justified and sanctified and as sure as Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, they will be glorified with Him. So **rest** in that Gospel you saints. There were more martyrs yet to be honoured with death and poured out at the base of His altar. The iniquity of the Romans was not yet complete (Gen 15:16). But like the coming of Israel to the Promised Land to bring God's judgement on the Canaanites generations, the Day of Reckoning was coming for Rome. The Day to prove God is not blind and His justice is not sleeping. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth who make themselves enemies of the Lamb. But peace be with all who find their rest in the all-sufficient salvation of the Lamb of God.

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- ⁱ c.f. E.B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticæ*, Vol. 1, p206.
- ⁱⁱ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries*. (London, 1876).p199, #1426. CCEL digital copy. [[http://classichristianlibrary.com/library/spurgeon_charles/Commenting and Commentaries by CH Spurgeon.pdf](http://classichristianlibrary.com/library/spurgeon_charles/Commenting_and_Commentaries_by_CH_Spurgeon.pdf)]. Accessed June 22, 2018.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Elliott, p207
- ^{iv} Oxford Dictionaries, Oxford University Press, "martyr" [<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/martyr>]. Accessed June 22, 2018.
- ^v *Greek New Testament*, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America [<http://onlinechapel.goarch.org/biblegreek/?id=26&book=Rev&chapter=6>]. Accessed June 22, 2018. C.f., *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform, 2005*, Eds. Maurice A. Robinson, William G. Pierpont (Chilton Publishing: Southborough, MA, 2005). P.505.
- ^{vi} Friberg's Lexicon, #27553; Louw-Nida, #83.51; Danker, #6590; Lust, Eynikel, Hauspie, #9211
- ^{vii} The point needs to be emphasized that the deaths of the saints don't add anything to the saving work of Christ's. The idea that the deaths of these believers is pictured as counted with Christ's death is not that these believers died as atoning sacrifices, but that their lives are counted as additional offerings to God in worship, because of Christ's sufficient sacrifice. Similarly in Philippians 3:10, Colossians 1:24, 1 Peter 4:13, and Romans 6:3, 5.
- ^{viii} Joseph Mede, *Clavis Apocalypticæ*. CCEL edition. Historicism.com [<http://historicism.com/misc/clavisapocalypticæ.pdf>]. Accessed June 22, 2018. p. 60.
- ^{ix} Louw-Nida, #37.63.
- ^x Wikipedia, "Diocletian" [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diocletian>]. Accessed June 22, 2018.
- ^{xi} Ibid., [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diocletian#Religious_persecutions].
- ^{xii} Elliott, 210.
- ^{xiii} Wikipedia, "Era of Martyrs" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Era_of_the_Martyrs]. Accessed June 22, 2018.
- ^{xiv} Ibid., "Anno Domini" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anno_Domini]. Accessed June 22, 2018.
- ^{xv} Elliott, p. 21, & fn.#3.
- ^{xvi} Peter Toon, "Diocletian", *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 1974). P299.
- ^{xvii} Mede quoting Orosius, p. 59.
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} Alphonsus De Liguori, *Victories of the Martyrs*, Ed. Eugene Grimm, Vol. 9 (Benziger Brothers: New York, 1888). p 151. [<https://books.google.ca/books?id=ipFJAAAAYAAJ&lpg=PA151&ots=imeJuJzHS9&dq=james%20marianus&pg=PA151#v=onepage&q=james%20marianus&f=false>] Accessed June 22, 2018.
- ^{xx} John Calvin quotes Maimonides saying that when priests qualified for service they were given white robes. *Calvin's Commentaries*, Olive Tree Edition. "Revelation 6:11".