

# Revelation Six (vv.9-17)

## Seal Five: Souls Under the Altar [vv.9-11]

**v.9.** The fifth seal contains a vision of martyred saints and occurs close to the mid-point of the tribulation. There are two sets of martyrs that must be distinguished. Some are slain during the “beginning of sorrows” (*first* 3.5 years), others during the Great Tribulation (*last* 3.5 years). The Lord Jesus spoke of these two groups of martyrs in the Olivet discourse (cf. Matthew 24.9, 16; Luke 21.12, 21). They are again distinguished in Revelation 20.4: “*And I saw thrones; and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them; and the souls of those beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus, and on account of the word of God; and those who had not done homage to the beast nor to his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and hand; and they lived and reigned with the Christ a thousand years*” [JND]. The first group are those who are beheaded on account of their allegiance to Christ and His word during the first half of the tribulation – these are the martyrs referred to under this seal as “*the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held*” (v.11a). The second group are persecuted and killed by the Beast during the second half of the tribulation – and referred to under this seal as “*their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed*” (v.11b).

The martyred company are referred to as **souls** which John saw **under the altar**. The *soul* is the immaterial part of man that animates the body. These individuals are called souls because they have not yet been resurrected and are therefore without their bodies (unclothed). The **altar** is not identified and *could* be the brazen altar because the blood of animal sacrifices was poured at the bottom of this altar (cf. Leviticus 4.7) and the word **slain** is frequently connected with animal sacrifices. However, RL Thomas says, “*If this were the altar of burnt offering, the souls of the martyrs would more likely be ‘on’ rather than ‘under’ the altar. Another weakness of the view is that it undercuts the uniqueness of the Lamb’s sacrificial death.*” Alternatively, the altar could be the golden altar as in every other reference in Revelation (cf. 8.3, 5; 9.13; 14.18; 16.7) except 11.1 which refers to the earthly temple. It seems, therefore, that there is no brazen altar in heaven! We are not surprised. It is the *Holy of Holies* and *Holy Place* that represent heaven, and the ongoing work of Christ in resurrection and exaltation. The *court of the tabernacle*, wherein was the brazen altar and laver (also not mentioned in Revelation), represents Christ’s work on earth which is now complete. There is no ongoing sacrifice of Christ in heaven – He Himself is there as testimony to a completed work at Calvary. Furthermore, judgments appear to come *out* of the golden altar (see 8.5; 9.13; 14.18) because they are the fruit of the imprecatory prayers of the saints. This is the execution of vengeance for which the saints are praying. In any case, the principal thought is that the location of their souls under the altar represents their martyrdom as an act of worship, a costly offering of themselves to God who is worthy of total devotion.

The martyrs were **slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held**. These saints were killed like sacrificial animals (even *beheaded*, 20.4) on account of their faithful adherence to the truth of God’s word. Their loyalty and allegiance to Christ was evident to others – and it cost them their lives. We are reminded of Barnabas and Paul, men who “*hazarded [to hand over, or sacrifice] their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Acts 15.26). Or as Revelation 12.11, “*they did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die.*” [NET]

**v.10.** The martyrs **cried with a loud voice** – a definite and urgent appeal. Their cry takes the form of an *imprecatory prayer* as they cry for vengeance, “**avenge our blood**”. The call is for the execution of righteous judgment in view of the injustice of their untimely deaths. But this is very different to the attitude of Stephen (cf. Acts 7.60)! Why? Because the dispensation has changed. This is now the era of God’s *government*, not His *grace*. Times have changed. In fact, much of the language is OT in character. They cry to the **Lord** [*despotēs*], sovereign Master or Ruler, *rather* than the Father (John 16.23; 20.17). The Lord is **holy** and **true**, attributes which demand a response to the cry of His people. He is **holy** and therefore cannot tolerate evil and injustice; He is **true** and will therefore be faithful to His people and His word. **How long?** was a cry raised by many an OT saint (cf. Psalm 13.1; 74.10; 89.46; 94.3). Why is God silent? Why is He apparently slow to act? This is the well-known and perplexing cry of suffering Israel – not to question the fact that God *will* act, but to ask *when* He will act. The object of judgment is **them that dwell on the earth**. This is a semi-technical expression in Revelation describing unbelievers who are hostile to God (cf. 3.10; 8.13; 11.10; 13.8). It indicates their *physical location* as well as describing their *moral identification*. Earth is their home, and they want for no other home!

**v.11.** In answer to the cry of the martyrs, heaven grants both a *symbol*, and a *word* of reassurance. The **white robes** [*stolē*] were long, flowing garments of state. The colour indicates the purity of all those who belong to God (7.9). They may have been unrighteously murdered on earth, but God gives them complete acquittal before His throne. Their faithfulness on earth has been rewarded! There is no problem with unclothed souls wearing white robes – no kind of temporary, intermediate body needs to be assumed. This is a symbolic scene – the martyrs are appreciated and accepted by heaven. It was **said unto them** (probably by God Himself) that they should **rest yet for a little season**. The nature of the exact

timing is not answered directly (cf. Acts 1.7), they must wait a little while longer. In the meantime, they are to enjoy **rest** (cf. Daniel 12.13), that is, relief from their labours and the struggle of persecution on earth in the blessed repose of heaven. The reason for the apparent delay is that another group of martyrs are ‘about to **be killed**’ (see notes on v.9 above). These martyrs are *both fellow servants and brethren*. The use of the word **brethren** may suggest they are mostly Jews (Matthew 25.40). Heaven will fully vindicate the martyrs, but only when the full number (quota) is reached (**fulfilled**). So, Abram and his seed could not fully claim the land of Canaan until the iniquity of the Amorites was full (Genesis 15.16). God will allow so much evil and iniquity, He will allow so many of His people to be slain, before enough is enough.

#### Seal Six: Seismic Convulsions in the Earth [vv.12-17]

**v.12.** Each of the three series of judgments in Revelation end with incredible cosmic disturbances. This sixth seal describes a seven-fold dissolution of the material creation – involving what is *seismic* (earthquake), *solar* (sun and moon) and *stellar* (stars). The events are literal but couched in symbolic language. This seal seems to introduce a series of such disturbances which progress through the remaining part of the tribulation. Jim Allen says, “*while the signs begin under the sixth seal and are continued and intensified under the sixth trumpet, the full climax comes in the seventh bowl just before the Lord Himself appears.*” See 8.5; 11.13, 19; 16.18. Several blackouts will occur (cf. 9.2; 16.10-11), not least at the second advent (Matthew 24.29; Joel 3.14-17). The Shechinah glory will be even more striking as it breaks through the darkness.

The opening of the sixth seal begins with a *megas seismos* – **great earthquake** (cf. Isaiah 13.13; 24.19-20; Joel 3.15-16; Nahum 1.5-6). Haggai says, “*For thus saith the Lord of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land*” before the Desire of all nations comes (2.6-7). It is possible the earthquake is accompanied by huge volcanic eruptions which could easily darken the sun and discolour the moon. Thus, the **sun became black as sackcloth of hair** – a black garment made of course goat’s hair and worn as a visible expression of mourning and despair. And the **moon became as blood**, possibly a deep copper colour typical of the moon when observed through certain atmospheric conditions like ash clouds (cf. Joel 2.31). **v.13.** The word **star** [*astēr*] can refer to large heavenly bodies like the sun, as well as smaller objects such as comets or meteors. What is likely a large-scale meteor shower (filling the sky with a myriad of blazing trails) will appear to earth dwellers as if the **stars of heaven** are falling to **the earth** (cp. 8.12). The falling meteors are likened to a **fig tree** in a severe storm that scatters its **untimely** (unripe) figs in all directions. The earth is being gripped by a mighty, divine hand which is shaking the planet and its inhabitants vigorously (cf. Isaiah 34.4). **v.14.** The cosmic convulsions are so severe, it will appear to those on earth as if the universe is splitting apart. The **heaven** (sky) will appear to split and roll back in two opposite directions. Each portion will roll-up like a **scroll** on either side (cf. Isaiah 34.4). As a likely consequence of the tectonic upheaval, **every mountain and island were moved** (shaken) **out of their places**. The language is likely hyperbolic as the removal of *every* mountain comes at a later time (16.20) and would make hiding in the rocks of the mountains very difficult (6.15)! **v.15.** No member of humanity will escape the calamities of this day of judgment (cf. Isaiah 24.1-4). There is a *sevenfold* classification. **Kings of the earth** – the heads of nations, whether emperors, presidents, or monarchs. **Great men** – ‘chief-ones’ are high-ranking officials such as prime ministers and cabinet members. **Rich men** – those who are affluent as well as financiers and city bankers who control commerce and world trade. **Chief captains** – all military leaders. **Mighty men** – ‘the strong’, those who through strength of position or personality exercise great control and influence over many. **Every bondman** and **every free man** – slaves and freemen made up the lower class of society, those without significant influence on others. All desperately seek refuge and respite from the judgment of God in the **dens** (caves) and amongst the **rocks** (boulders or cliffs) **of the mountains**.

**v.16.** They call to the **mountains** and **rocks** to **fall** on them and **hide** them from divine wrath. People will long for death, thinking it will provide escape from the judgment of God. Three such cries are recorded elsewhere, each time in the setting of a time of national calamity for Israel (Isaiah 2.19; Hosea 10.8; Luke 23.30). It is a graphic picture of terror and despair. The **face of him** is a Hebrew phrase from Genesis 3.8 when Adam and Eve sought to hide themselves from the *presence* (face) of the Lord God. The phrase **and from the wrath of the Lamb** places the Lamb and the throne-sitter (God) on equality, indicating the Lamb is of the same essence and nature as God. The word **wrath** [*orgē*] describes a settled or abiding condition, in contrast to a sudden outburst [*thumos*], cf. 15.1, 7; 16.1. **v.17.** Such is the magnitude of the convulsions, earth dwellers begin to realise these events are more than merely natural – the **great day of his** (divine) **wrath is come**. But this is only the mid-point of the tribulation! Note. The RV (with good manuscript authority) reads, “the great day of *their* wrath is come”, that is, the wrath of *both* the throne sitter and the Lamb. “**Who shall be able to stand (endure)?**” Cf. Nahum 1.6. RL Thomas says, “*The question does not refer to standing before God to be judged. It has to do with remaining on earth and maintaining an existence with the awareness that hardships will worsen as the intensity of God’s wrath grows.*” The implied answer is no-one is able to endure. This is the perfect bridge to Revelation 7 which will reveal some who are be protected and enabled by God to stand through the whole period.