

## The Fifth Seal (Part One)

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*"When 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 testimony which  
they held.*

*And they cried with a loud voice, saying,*

*'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who  
dwell on the earth?'*

*And a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should  
rest a little while longer,*

*until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed  
as they were, was completed."*

— Revelation 6:9-11

As a child, the scariest movie I saw was *Quo Vadis?* To most people, this movie falls in the "Christian Epic" genre rather than "Horror," but for me, it evoked dread and nightmares. Unlike today's movies, it did not splash blood or gore on the screen, but it tastefully depicted the horrors of Rome's persecution and martyrdom of Christians in an arresting, heartrending manner. Its scenes of Christians being attacked and devoured by lions in the Circus or being immolated as torches for Nero's garden party were no less disturbing for being without the *Gladiator*-type realism.

Most Christian libraries are not complete without *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, which contains accounts of dozens of persecutions of Christians down the centuries. In school we read histories of religious wars—from the bloody spread of Islam across the Middle East and North Africa and into Europe, through the Crusades to repulse the infidels from the Holy Land, to the Catholic-Protestant wars ignited by the Reformation—in which hundreds of thousands of professing Christians lost their lives. More recently, while millions of Jews suffered horrible deaths at the hands of Hitler and Stalin, large numbers of Christians died with them in the concentration camps.

Currently, professing Christians are suffering and dying for their beliefs in predominantly Muslim and Communist nations. Though most secular pundits do not care to admit it, the War on Terror is really a clash of two civilizations founded on mutually exclusive religions. The Islamic side is presently engaged in holy war to convert or exterminate its enemies, while the Judeo-Christian side, morally weak and increasingly secular, seeks a political and/or military solution to contain or roll back the jihadists. Some see this war as the latest chapter in a sporadic yet titanic conflict between the two predominant religions on earth, which had lain mostly dormant since the Spanish ousted the Moors from Europe in 1492.

On May 27, 2004, AgapePress reported in "Communist Asia, Mid-East Countries Top Church Persecution Charts" by Allie Martin and Jenni Parker on the primary international culprits:

On a list of the 50 countries around the world where persecution of Christians is greatest, North Korea is the leader of the pack.

Each year Open Doors, a ministry to the persecuted Church, compiles a world watch list of countries where Christian believers face the most severe persecution. North Korea topped the most recent list, followed by Saudi Arabia, Laos, the central highlands of Vietnam, and Iran.

Also included in the top ten worst countries is Burma, which has no constitution or laws to protect freedom of religion. Open Doors' Jerry Dykstra says the government of Burma favors Buddhists but treats Christians harshly.

"Christian homes and churches have been burned down," Dykstra notes, "especially among the ethnic tribes—persecution is really high. The government there is very restrictive, very wary of Christians. Christians suffer. They are not awarded jobs, and sometimes they don't get benefits." . . .

China also made the ministry's top ten list, Dykstra says. Persecution has not lessened under the new president, Hu Jintao, despite public commitments to human rights and religious freedom. In that communist nation, where Christians are required to register with the official state church, those believers who resist government control over their religious life must often face harassment by the police, detention, beatings, and torture, and other forms of government intimidation.

Nevertheless, we tend to think of Christian persecution and martyrdom in the past tense, believing that modern ideas of religious freedom and tolerance make such murderous events impossible today. However, to reach such a conclusion would be a mistake. Not only are professing Christians currently undergoing discrimination and maltreatment even in America—as extensively documented in David Limbaugh's recent book, *Persecution*—but the Bible promises us that large-scale persecutions and martyrdoms of the saints will also take place before Christ's return. We find this plainly prophesied in the fifth seal of Revelation 6:9-11.

### **Souls of the Slain**

After Christ opens the fifth seal, the apostle John sees "under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held" (verse 9). No galloping horses or deadly riders appear in this seal, and their absence immediately sets this one apart from the previous four. There is no inviting, "Come and see," or expectant, "And I looked, and behold," but just a plain narrative describing his vision. In fact, the tone is so matter-of-fact as to be somber, befitting its subject.

The first striking detail is "the altar" with the definite article. That it is not further defined suggests that it has already been mentioned or that the reader is expected to know what it is. However, this verse contains the first mention of an altar in the book of Revelation. An altar is mentioned an additional seven times in the book, and in six of them, it refers to the golden incense altar that stands before the throne of God in heaven (see Revelation 8:3-5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7). The only exception to this appears in Revelation 11:1, in which John is told to "measure the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship there," seeming to refer to evaluating the church, its ministers, and its worship in preparation for the work of the Two Witnesses. The "altar" of Revelation 6:9, with the prayerful souls of martyrs under it, conforms to the rule, not the exception.

The word "souls" (*psuchás*, plural of *psuchê*) also requires explanation, as the Greek word is far too complex in meaning to define facily as a person's immortal essence, as most Catholics and Protestants are wont to do. Its basic meaning is "breath," and is thus equivalent to the Hebrew *nephesh* and Latin *anima* (as in English "animal" and "animate"). One of its uses is as the New Testament version of what Genesis 2:7 calls "the breath of life," that is, the vital force that makes a body live: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being [*nephesh*]." Luke 12:20 and Acts 20:10 use *psuchê* in this manner.

From this basic meaning derives its extensions: as "life" (see Matthew 6:25; John 10:11; Philippians 2:30; Revelation 12:11) and "living being" (see I Corinthians 15:45; Revelation 16:3). In addition, *psuchê* can refer to the seat of emotion, will, and desire, whereas we would use the terms "heart," "mind," "personality," or "being" today (see Luke 1:46; Acts 14:2, 22; Hebrews 6:19; II Peter 2:14). In a similar sense, it can also identify man's moral and spiritual life (see Hebrews 13:17; I Peter 1:22; 2:11, 25; 4:19; III John 2).

Some try to read immortality into certain biblical uses of *psuchê* (for instance, Acts 2:27, 31; II Corinthians 1:23; Revelation 20:4), but the Bible does not support such an interpretation. In fact, in one of these, Matthew 10:28, Jesus confirms that souls can indeed be destroyed (also supported by the Old Testament in Job 33:22; Ezekiel 18:4, 20)! One must consult extrabiblical sources (such as Plato, Xenophon, Herodotus, and other Greek writers) to find usages of *psuchê* that define "the soul as an essence which differs from the body and is not dissolved by death" (*Thayer's Lexicon*).

How then is this word used in Revelation 6:9? We must remember that John is viewing a vision (Revelation 1:10), a symbolic representation for mortal eyes and minds of future events, not reality. One cannot see a person's actual soul, that is, his being, his life, so what John saw were *representations* of those who had been martyred. He probably literally saw bodies (Greek *soma*) under the altar but chose to identify them as *psuchás*, "lives" or "persons," because, as the next verses show, the vision depicts them speaking and receiving clothing, things a person can do only while alive.

The important point to remember is that John specifically identifies them as having been "slain"—they are dead—and the Bible elsewhere shows that "the dead know nothing" (Ecclesiastes 9:5) and cannot work, plan, learn, or pursue any activity in the grave (verse 10). Thus, John, a Hebrew, is using *psuchê* in the same sense as Old Testament writers sometimes use *nephesh*, as "dead body," a being that once had life (see Leviticus 21:11; Numbers 6:6; 9:6-7, 10; 19:11, 13; Haggai 2:13).

## **Word and Testimony**

The apostle John tells why these saints suffered martyrdom: "for the word of God and for the testimony which they held." For John, these two are important elements, and they occur several times in Revelation. In opening the book, the apostle contends that he himself "bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ" in Revelation 1:2, and in verse 9 he says he "was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ." Later, when observing a vision of God's people contending with Satan, he writes, "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death" (Revelation 12:11). A statement similar to Revelation 6:9 appears in Revelation 20:4: "And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God."

The first element, *the word of God*, is straightforward: It is the truth, the inspired revelation of God, that we find today in the Bible. For John and many in the first century, it was the Old Testament combined with the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Only later was this supplemented by the epistles of the apostles, Acts, and Revelation. (No one can be certain when the authoritative canon was compiled, but all the components were likely in place by the time John died. Using Isaiah 8:16, some believe that he authorized the present canon before his death, c. AD 100.) Unlike many today, these martyrs of the fifth seal do not take God's Word for granted, believing instead that its message is personally vital, current, and authoritative, and they are willing to die rather than compromise with its instruction.

The second element, *the testimony which they held*, can seem to some to be more complex. The key word, *testimony*, is the Greek word *marturían*, which means either "the act or office of testifying" or "what one testifies." In modern terms, it is either the giving of evidence, as before a judge in a courtroom, or the evidence itself. The word *witness* is similarly used, as, for instance, the Two Witnesses of Revelation 11 are called *mártusín* ("witnesses" or "martyrs"), a related word. Their "testimony," then, is evidence they give or a witness they provide.

We should not forget the final phrase, "which they held," as it adds definition and emphasis to their testimony. The evidence they give means something special to them! It is not as if they witnessed an auto accident and, as unbiased bystanders, simply testified about how it happened. Their testimony is something so precious that they hold it fast, bear it, maintain it, keep it in trust, possess it, consider it, believe it, and adhere to it.

How do they give their testimony? It could be different for each one, but notice Jesus' interpretation of this seal in Luke 21:12-19:

But before all these things [the heavenly signs of the sixth seal], they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will send some of you to your death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost. In your patience possess your souls.

He specifically mentions testifying before religious authorities, in prisons, and before secular leaders. These are the "classic" occasions for witnessing of the truth, all of which are reported as happening to the apostles in the book of Acts. He also hints at other ways of testifying, more personal ones that involve relatives and "friends" seeing a Christian practicing his beliefs or hearing him propounding the truth, and betraying him to the authorities.

Hebrews 11 gives multiple examples of the heroes of faith making a witness of the true God and His way. Abel, for example, bore witness by making an acceptable sacrifice (verse 4). Enoch's translation was witness that He pleased God (verse 5). Noah's obedience in constructing the ark bore witness of his faith (verse 7). Abraham testified of his allegiance in many ways: leaving Ur (verse 8), dwelling in tents in Canaan (verse 9), and sacrificing Isaac (verse 17). Sarah, too, testified by conceiving and bearing the promised son, Isaac (verse 11). Later, Moses showed his faith by refusing royal rank (verse 24), forsaking Egypt (verse 27), and keeping the Passover (verse 28).

Likewise, we give testimony of our devotion to God and our beliefs in simple, everyday acts, many of which we probably never consider to be witnessing. We make a witness to other members of our families with our every word, act, and decision. We witness of our adherence to law in our public activities, from driving our cars to paying our taxes. Our diligence and thoroughness on the job testify of our godly character or lack thereof. One could go so far as to say that everything we say and do that is witnessed by others shouts out the testimony that we hold.

Are we, like these martyred saints, willing to lay down our lives for God's Word and our beliefs? It may never come to that for any of us personally, but do we have the sacrificial attitude applauded by Revelation 6:11 and many other New Testament verses? Do we value God's revelation of His way of life highly enough to defend it despite the cost? Do we, as Jesus warns in Luke 14:26, "hate" our lives enough to be His disciples?