

The Fifth Seal (Part Two)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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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

Persecution and martyrdom are not popular topics among Christians today, but they are facts of Christian life. Whether they reach the depths of Nero's or Domitian's persecutions of the saints in the church's first century or whether they are "merely" employment problems or social snubs, they still exist. They still hurt. They still take their toll.

In the New Testament, the apostles approach the subject of persecution courageously but matter-of-factly. To our eyes, looking back over the centuries to what we perceive to be a brutal, inhuman time, they come across as resigned to its eventual occurrence, and this should not be unexpected, since they had already endured a great deal of it personally and anticipated that it would strike most other Christians in due course. They certainly did not relish its appearance, but they considered it in the same vein we look at traffic-snarling accidents on our daily commute—as part of the journey to be endured with dignity and patience.

The apostle Paul—who suffered more than his fair share of persecution, even to near-death a few times (see his list in II Corinthians 11:23-28)—is known for a couple of such statements. In Acts 14:22, just after being stoned by Jews in Lystra, he and Barnabas are attributed as saying encouragingly, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." At the other end of his ministry, imprisoned and awaiting trial before Nero, Paul writes Timothy, ". . . what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (II Timothy 3:11-12). It is a given, he says, that the practice of true Christianity will attract persecution.

In his epistles too, Peter advises Christians to suffer their expected persecutions with joy, faith, grace, and patience:

For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer for it, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps. . . . (I Peter 2:19-21)

But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled." . . . For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good, than for doing evil. (I Peter 3:14, 17)

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try [test] you, as though some strange thing happened to you, but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings. . . . If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. . . . Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. . . . Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator. (I Peter 4:12-14, 16, 19)

This is exactly what Jesus Himself taught during His ministry. He says in the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5: 10-12)

Later, speaking to His disciples before His arrest, He warns:

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. . . . If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. (John 15:18-20).

They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. . . . These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. (John 16:2-3, 33)

So it is no wonder that the fifth seal concerns persecution and martyrdom. A world deceived by false religion and racked by wars, famines, and diseases, can be expected to lash out at those who teach and live a different and better way, the way of God.

How long, O Lord?"

In his vision, the apostle John hears the souls under the altar beseech God, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10). Theirs is not a bloodthirsty cry for vengeance, as some have seen it, since this does not accord with Christian character (Romans 12:19-21), but a call for justice or judgment—a major theme of the seals—as well as a question about the proximity of Christ's return. It is well known that at His second coming, He will both reward His saints and judge His enemies (see Matthew 24:30-31; Revelation 11: 15-18; Joel 3:9-17; Zechariah 14:1-5).

This plaintive cry, "How long . . .?" is a New Testament echo of the Old Testament prophets, many of whom were persecuted and slain for their testimony. The psalmists use it most frequently: from

David in Psalm 13:1 ("How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?") to Asaph in Psalm 74:10 ("O God, how long will the adversary reproach?") to Moses in Psalm 90:13 ("Return, O Lord! How long? And have compassion on Your servants"). Even Ethan the Ezrahite gets in on the act: "How long, Lord? Will You hide Yourself forever? Will Your wrath burn like fire?" (Psalm 89:46; see also Psalm 6:3; 35:17; 79:5; 80:4; 94:3).

This question continues in both the major and minor prophets. Isaiah writes, "Then I said, 'Lord, how long?' And He answered: 'Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, the houses are without a man, the land is utterly desolate. . .'" (Isaiah 6:11). Later, Habakkuk asks, "O Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? Even cry out to You, 'Violence!' and You will not save" (Habakkuk 1:2; see also Daniel 12:6; Zechariah 1:12). "How long?" has been a constant prayer to God through the ages, especially during times of great distress, particularly when God's servants are under intense persecution, when the surrounding culture has reached its nadir and the nation is ripe for judgment, or as it often works out, when both are happening simultaneously.

The intent of the request in Revelation 6:10 is for an indication from God of how long the saints have to endure the worst that Satan-inspired humanity can throw at them before He acts on their behalf as He has promised. As early as Deuteronomy 32:43, the conclusion of the Song of Moses, it is promised, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people; for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and render vengeance to His adversaries." Jesus Himself promises, "And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily" (Luke 18:7-8). Paul later expands this considerably:

. . . it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. (II Thessalonians 1:6-10)

There is never a doubt about God's eventual intervention to avenge the deaths of His saints. God's promises are sure (Isaiah 46:11; 55:11; Matthew 24:35; John 10:35). Obviously, "How long, O Lord . . .?" is a query about the duration of events until God intervenes, and the souls under the altar ask it, not in impatience or exasperation, but in anticipation of the end of the saints' tribulations and of the receipt of their reward.

In reading this, however, we must not forget that these martyred saints are dead, resting in their graves, as Revelation 6:11 confirms. Thus, the answer to their question is not for them—they know nothing (Ecclesiastes 9:5), their testimony having finished in death (Acts 20:24; II Timothy 4:7; Revelation 11:7)—but for living saints, who will undergo persecution and eventual martyrdom.

God's Answer

Before God answers them, they are each given a white robe in Revelation 6:11. Much has been made of the fact that this robe is a *stolé*, a long, stately, often status-indicating garment, while the overcomer in Sardis receives a white *himation*, an ordinary outer garment like a cape or cloak (Revelation 3:5). This distinction should not be taken too far, as Christ Himself returns in a *himation*

dipped in blood (Revelation 19:13), not a *stolé*. The important element is that the robe is white, the color of purity and righteousness, as well as joy, victory, and perfection (see "The Four Horsemen (Part Two): The White Horse," *Forerunner*, May 2004, p. 12). The giving of a white robe, formal or common, is a symbol of salvation for these martyred Christians.

Finally, God responds to their question: ". . . 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." The immediate answer, "a little while longer" (literally, "yet a little time"), is ambiguously short-range. At this point in the prophetic timeline as we have learned it—the Great Tribulation has just commenced—this uncertain period is probably at most three and a half years long.

Yet, because Revelation was written to the church late in the first century—more than nineteen hundred years ago—this comforting and expectant phrase implies a longer duration for Christians through the ages since then. II Peter 3:8 reminds us "that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." There is even biblical backing to regard the day of the Lord as the whole period since Christ's *first* advent nearly two millennia ago! Written around the same time as Revelation, I John 2:18 goes even further: "[W]e know it is the last *hour*"! Certainly, God marks time differently than we do. Nevertheless, the phraseology assures us that, though it is still future, God's vengeance will fall justly on the guilty, and His saints will be free of suffering and receive their promised reward.

The explanatory material that fills out the remainder of the verse provokes varied interpretation. The reason for this is that two similar but variant readings of "was completed" have come down to us in the manuscripts: *plerothosin* and *plerososin*. The former is aorist passive, meaning, as in the New King James Version, that "the number of their fellow servants . . . was completed," while the latter is plain aorist, changing the sense to either "their fellow servants . . . should be complete" (less likely, according to the experts) or they "should complete [their course]" or "should fulfill [their calling]."

Yet, this may all be just a semantic argument. By using italics, most Bibles make it clear that *the number of* is not in the Greek text but has been supplied by the translators. This was done to conform to their misunderstanding of the passive form, *plerothosin*. Since mainstream Christians, including translators, do not believe in the biblical doctrine of sanctification as a lifelong process—in cooperation with God—of spiritual growth toward perfection, translations of this verse contain a built-in bias toward a certain number being saved by grace alone through faith rather than those whom God calls being transformed into the image of Christ through grace *and* works. Thus, they insert the italicized phrase unnecessarily to preclude the idea of Christian works—despite the fact that the entire passage exalts the particular works of witnessing and martyrdom!

Nevertheless, the verb—whichever is chosen as the better of the two—appears in the *plural* form, as it refers to its plural subjects, "servants and . . . brethren." "Number" is singular. This provides additional proof that Revelation 6:11 is not referring to a specific number of martyrs but simply that others either will be completed or will complete their calling through martyrdom. The latter half of the verse, then, is better rendered, ". . . until their fellow servants and their brethren, who are to be killed as they were, should also be complete [or, *should also complete (their course)*]." In other words, whether passively or actively, more sons and daughters will come to perfection through suffering and death, just as God's Firstborn Son did as our Forerunner (Hebrews 2:9-11).

Vengeance Is Coming

Like the first four seals, the fifth is a judgment "on those who dwell on the earth" (Revelation 6:10). We are distracted from this because the action focuses on Christian martyrs who have endured the hostility of men and women who, as spiritual children of Satan (John 8:38, 41, 44), have accepted this world's anti-God attitudes and beliefs. Yet, judgment is present, appearing in God's promise that, because He is the "[Sovereign] Lord, holy and true," He will judge and avenge His faithful servants. Time may pass before this is accomplished, but it is assured.

As this world continues its downward spiral toward the end, Christians can take comfort in this otherwise horrific prophecy. Some of us may be called upon to pay the ultimate price to witness before the world of God's truth and way of life, but it is made "easier" knowing that God will not let it go unpunished and unrewarded. With God's faithful assurance backing us, we can "rest"—be at peace or at ease—knowing our sacrifice will not be in vain.