

Christ Comforts His Martyrs

Revelation 6:9-11

9 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. **10** 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?' **11** Then 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.

In the third and fourth chapters of The Revelation of Jesus Christ (last book in the Bible), we read of Him as the slaughtered and worthy Lamb ascending to God's throne in heaven and receiving the scroll containing God's decree regarding events throughout this present age. This scroll is sealed with seven seals. We read in chapters six through eight of Christ opening the seven seals, and the events associated with each (1st in 6:1f; 2nd in 6:3f; 3rd in 6:5f; 4th in 6:7f; 5th in 6:9-11; 6th in 6:12-16; interlude in ch.7; 7th in 8:1-5).

I. Christ's martyrs are the subject of the fifth seal (v.9): "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."

This "fifth seal" necessarily follows the preceding four seals (vv.1-8), which present the revealing of God's decree for His chosen people throughout this present age.

- In the *first* seal (vv.1f), Christ on His *white* horse graciously conquers God's elect, who are by nature at enmity against Him, and causes them to become His disciples.
- In the *second* seal (vv.3f), the rider on the *red* horse represents those who slaughter Christ's disciples.
- In the *third* seal (vv.5f), the rider on the *black* horse represents those who persecute Christ's disciples who are not slain by the preceding rider.
- In the *fourth* seal (vv.7f), the rider on the *pale* horse represents those who kill Christ's disciples, along with much of the rest of mankind, through warfare, pestilences, famine, and beasts.

Christ's disciples, who have been graciously conquered by Him and malevolently persecuted and slaughtered by His enemies, are here identified as "those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held".

The Greek word here translated "testimony" (*marturia*) is the witness of a *martyr*. Both the *religious* and *secular* definition of a martyr is one who suffers or is killed because of his beliefs. But this definition goes beyond the *Biblical* definition. A *martyr* in the *Biblical* sense is one who testifies of what he has seen or heard or knows. The Greek word is usually translated *witness*, as when Jesus told His apostles "you shall be *witnesses* [or *martyrs*] to Me" (Acts 1:8). John was one of those apostles, and he was a martyr/witness to Jesus, although he was not killed for being a martyr, as was his brother James (Acts 12:1f).

In this Biblical sense of *martyr*, *all* Christ's witnesses are His martyrs, whether they die *for* their testimony or *in* their testimony. Not all Christ's martyrs are *physically* "slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held". But they are willing to be so. And they are considered by Christ as having been so. Furthermore, as surely as one is guilty of murder if he hates another without a cause (Matthew 5:21f), so surely is a martyr slain if his persecutors have desired it to be so.

John saw only the "souls" of Christ's martyrs. Souls, although spiritual and not physical, have substance or essence. The physical eye cannot see spiritual souls. But the spiritual eye in heaven can. And John at this time "was in the Spirit" (4:2). The bodies of these souls are on earth awaiting "the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24; cp. 1 Corinthians 15:35ff).

John saw the souls of Christ's martyrs "under the altar". This altar is "the golden altar which is before God" in heaven (9:13).

The souls under this altar are of "those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony [Greek *marturia*] which they held". They were slain for their testimony regarding Jesus Christ, for He is "The Word of God" (19:13), and they had steadfastly held to their testimony regarding Him.

The fact that the souls of *all* God's people are under this altar is indicated by the fact that from this altar ascends "the prayers of *all* the saints" to God, like sweet incense to Him (8:3).

And the fact that all Christ's people are His martyrs is indicated in 20:4: "I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image,

and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” All God’s saints reign with Christ. All who reign with Christ are His martyrs.

II. Christ’s martyrs cry for vengeance (v.10): “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?’”

Martyrs cry for *vengeance*, not *revenge*. *Revenge* is inflicting pain or harm in retaliation by one who feels himself to be a victim. *Vengeance* is punishing a wrongdoing with the intent of seeing justice done. *Revenge* is personal and spiteful and usually excessive. But *vengeance* is godly and just and always appropriate.

Saints do not avenge themselves, for they obey the exhortation “do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19). “He will avenge the blood of His servants, and render vengeance to His adversaries” (Deuteronomy 32:43).

Martyrs wonder “how long” will it be until justice is served on those wicked people who persecuted and killed them. Did not Jesus commend one who said “shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him ...? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily” (Luke 187f). How long will it be before He does so?

III. Christ comforts His martyrs (v.11): “Then 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.”

This “robe” is given to all who enter heaven, and is the garment for their souls in that place (see 7:9). (Remember that their bodies are still on earth.)

This robe is “white” in color. This color symbolizes sinlessness and purity. White is appropriate for all who are in heaven.

The martyrs in their white robes are told “that they should rest a little while longer”. Heaven is a place of rest, for earthly work is done. Some martyrs have been at rest for almost two thousand years. But we must remember “that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8). Martyrs who have been in heaven for almost two thousand years have been there a little less than two days according to God’s schedule. Surely they can wait a few more minutes!

The martyrs are told to rest “until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.” Christ’s martyrs will not be avenged until Christ returns. Christ will not return until two things have happened. First, the number of the martyrs’ “fellow servants” must be completed. Christ accomplishes this by going forth on His white horse to save them all. Second, the number of Christ’s martyrs must be completed. All these fellow servants must become witnesses of Christ, and hated or killed by the wicked for being so.

The “number” of these fellow servants and martyrs is not known to us. But it is known to God. When the last of God’s elect has been converted and the last of Christ’s martyrs has been slain, their number will be “completed”, and Christ will return to judge those who persecuted them. (See the sixth and the seventh seals.)

Who said this to the martyrs? He is not identified by name. But he is either Jesus Christ or someone speaking for Him. He here (v.11) responds to the martyrs’ prayer to “O Lord, holy and true” (v.10).

This “Lord” is the *Supreme Ruler*, for this is the meaning of the Greek word (*despotēs*, whence *despot*). Jesus Christ is this Supreme Ruler, for He is “King of kings and Lord of Lords” (17:14; 19:16).

This Supreme Ruler is “holy and true”. Again, this is Jesus Christ, for He ascribes these two attributes to Himself when He says “These things says He who is *holy*, He who is *true*” (3:7).

His martyrs now implore Him to “judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth”. Jesus Christ will do so when He returns, when “in righteousness He judges and makes war” against those who made war against His witnesses (19:11).

Jesus Christ here greatly comforts His martyrs!

Christ’s people on earth today should also take great comfort from these words. If you witness for Jesus Christ, you are one of His martyrs. The wicked will persecute you, but Christ will never forget you. He will receive you in glory, give to you eternal rest, clothe you with a white robe, and judge your enemies and avenge your blood.

– Daniel E. Parks (February 19, 2017; #968)