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# **REVELATION**

**SPIRITUALLY UNDERSTOOD**

**PART 6**

**REVELATION 6:9-17**

**The Mystery of the Suffering Church  
and the  
Fate of Her Oppressors**

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# **REVELATION SPIRITUALLY UNDERSTOOD**

## **PART SIX**

### **THE MYSTERY OF THE SUFFERING CHURCH AND THE FATE OF HER OPPRESSORS**

Revelation 6: 9-17

The Sealed Book of chapters 5 and 6 contains God's reply to the ungodly who reject His gospel and who afflict His people. We have seen that the breaking of the first four seals introduces Christ and the three great agents of His righteous rule (that rule which is a rod of iron over the wicked). Victory, and nothing but victory, is the keynote of His reign; the fearful ministers of His justice wait upon Him, in the figures of the three terrifying horsemen, who ride to and fro in the world, at His bidding, to break the tyranny of sin and unbelief, and open up a way for the redeemed to pass through.

THE FIFTH SEAL discloses the nature of the Church's witness down the ages. The saints suffer for their testimony to Christ, and this is the cause of the outpouring of the divine judgment on the world of the ungodly.

“And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were 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, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”  
- Revelation 6:9-10.

Here is 'the noble army of martyrs' slain for the witness which they bore to the Name of Christ - but not those only who have actually suffered death for Christ's sake, but rather the entire Church of Christ from the beginning to the end of time, for the Church as a whole is always a martyr Church in this world, though the number of those actually slain is few in comparison with the great mass of believers. The few represent the many - and sometimes it is harder to live for Christ than to die for His sake.

It is a symbolic picture which is given to us in the Fifth Seal. The souls of martyred saints repose under the altar of burnt offering, where the blood of the sacrifices was poured out. The offering up of their lives appears as a sacrifice to the Lord, because of whom they loved not their lives even unto the death. There are more ways of slaying the people of God than by the faggot and stake. "They shoot out their arrows, even bitter words", says the psalmist. "They eat up my people as they would eat bread". "For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter". The martyred ones of the Fifth Seal are representative of the people God as a whole, whose testimony is treated alike by the world, whether or not the witnesses are put to death by them. Every witness for the Lord Jesus takes this same stand. The world does not object to religion as such, so long as it is not the kind which exposes its own worldliness and shame. Hence it is only gospel people who in the long run excite the opposition of all classes of worldly people, including religious formalists.

That these martyrs are found 'under the altar' shows how far removed we are from literal meanings. There is no actual altar in heaven, nor are the righteous departed stored up therein, nor do they cry for vengeance upon those who have persecuted them on the earth. Again, as throughout in this symbolic Book, we are in the region of hieroglyph. The martyrs are so represented as 'under the altar' because the altar represents sacrifice, and the death of the martyred saints, in the light of heavenly reality, is a sacrifice of devotion and consecration to Christ; a testimony of love and adoration to the One who endured so much for them and for their salvation. The thought is no doubt drawn from the Levitical offerings the blood of which was poured out beneath the altar (see Lev. 4:7 etc). The devotion of the redeemed soul to the Saviour, carried even unto death, is one of the greatest testimonies to the truth and righteousness of the divine Being. That all do not end their days in martyrdom does not mean that there is not the same potential in them, as in the martyrs, to suffer for Christ's sake.

A caution might be necessary here, for many no doubt will be prepared to boast that they would go through fiery trial for Christ's sake and lay down their lives for Him, who are not asked to do any more than live for Him. It may be easier to die for Christ in some circumstances than to go on living for Him. If we can endure His sake the slights and annoyances which come because of faith in Him; if we can cheerfully go the second mile; if we can be silent and restrained under unjust rebuke; in short, if we can be faithful in little it may be a surer sign that we are likely to be faithful in much.

In numerous places the Scriptures bear witness to the readiness of the Church as a whole to suffer for Christ's sake; it is implied everywhere that part of the calling of the true Christian is to suffer and endure patiently for Christ's sake.

The first martyr in history was Abel, who was slain by his brother Cain. "And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:12). It is perhaps a significant thing that the first man into the grave was the first man into heaven; the first death was that of a martyr for Christ's sake.

What is it which constitutes martyrdom? Is it not the readiness to suffer, if not to die, for the sake of Christ? It is a solemn calling which falls upon all who profess faith in Him. Before leaving the Upper Room to go forth to the Garden and the Cross, these cautionary words were spoken by the Saviour to His entire Church:

"The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; ... These things have I spoken unto you that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea the time cometh when whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service." - John 15:20 – 16:2

Again, the Lord warns, "These things have I spoken unto you that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer: I have overcome the world". (John 16:33)

In His last dedicatory prayer, the Lord thus addresses the Father on behalf of His apostles and those thereafter whom His apostles perpetually represent, "I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them because they are not of the world even as I am not of the world". (John 17:14)

His earlier ministry was fully charged with warnings that to follow Him meant suffering in a world given over to wickedness and unbelief. Thus: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth. I came not to send peace but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance with his father, and the daughter against her mother ...and a man's foes shall be they of his own household... He that taketh not his cross and followeth after me is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it". (Matthew 10:34-39)

Paul declares, “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution”. (2 Timothy 3:12) “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are filled all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us ....” (Romans 8:35-37)

Peter writes, “Beloved think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you, but rejoice inasmuch as ye are PARTAKERS OF CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS; that when his glory shall be revealed ye may be glad also with exceeding joy”. (1 Peter 4:12-13)

The sufferings of the Church in the Old Testament from Abel onward are summarised by Paul at the end of the great 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews wherein the age-long triumphs of faith are recorded:

“... Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy): they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.” - Hebrews 11:35-38

## THE CRY FOR VENGEANCE

The cry for vengeance from the saints under the altar in Revelation 6 must be understood as in the case of the prototype of all suffering and murdered saints, Abel, whose innocent blood, the Lord declares, “Crieth unto me from the ground”. (Genesis 4:10). In literal fact, blood has no voice to cry unto God. The words are figurative, and mean that a just and holy God abhors the shedding of innocent blood and His righteousness demands that the ungodly deed, unrepented of should not pass unpunished.

Abel was already enjoying the bliss of heaven, beyond all death and suffering, but his unavenged blood demanded a recompense from the judge of all the earth.

The martyred saints do not seek vengeance, any more than did Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who cried in the moment of terrible death, “Lay not this sin to their charge”. (Acts 7:60) The figure used in Genesis 4 and Revelation 6 is simply

the dramatisation of a principle. It means that so long as righteous blood remains unavenged there is an unsatisfied demand on divine and holy justice. "Vengeance is mine: I will repay", says the Lord. Sometimes in this world, inevitably at the great Judgment Throne, recompense for every unrighteous and unrepented deed will be exacted.

This is the principle behind the so-called 'comminatory' psalms, crudely and often contemptuously referred to by Bible critics (who as usual make themselves more righteous and holy than God) as "the cursing psalms". David's sufferings at the hands of Saul are the source of many of his best-known psalms, and his cry for recompense against the wicked was not only valid before God but was in fact and in due time verified in the overthrow and the shame of his foes. He wrote as a prophet and a poet, inspired by the Spirit of God, to show the suffering people of God in all ages that God sees and records, and in due time, though judgment be long delayed, will recompense the wicked for the evil they have done (see Psalms 69, 70, and 71). Even Psalm 137, over which so many critics and self-righteous persons have frowned because of its terrible language uttered against the cruelties of Babylon at the destruction of Israel, must be prophetically understood, for in fact Babylon was served as she had served Jerusalem, and after many remarkable warnings by God, uttered by His servant Daniel, was removed from the face of the earth by the Medo-Persian power in a divinely appointed and exquisitely timed judgment, condign, and fully deserved.

The recent fate of Nazi Germany after an incredible career of violence, hate and cruelty, was thoroughly approved by the voice of outraged justice rising from the four corners of the earth. The terrible fate which overtook Japan at the same time was equally just if the cries of myriad prisoners of war, starved, driven, and slain have any voice in the human conscience.

How much more therefore will the Lord avenge His own elect who cry unto Him day and night, though He bear long and patiently with them? (Luke 18:7 - The words of Christ Himself).

The Day of Judgment will be the great day of recompense for all the crimes ever committed on the earth. Nothing will be overlooked or forgotten. Of every idle word that men shall speak they shall give account in that day. The stability of creation depends on the judgment of evil, but there is always mercy for the repentant, and the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is the symbol of that mercy and the means by which it can be righteously extended to the penitent without threat to the stability of that government which upholds the pillars of creation.

We now understand the cry of the martyrs from the altar, “How long O Lord, holy and true, does thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” In fact, in the hour of their sufferings they often prayed for mercy on those who did the deed of cruelty and death, and who knows how often their prayer was heard in the ultimate penitence of those who slew the righteous? We have the notable case of Saul of Tarsus in whose ears the dying cry of Stephen, the first Christian martyr always rang (Acts 22:20).

The words, “How long ...” are taken from numerous passages in the OT, including Psalm 69:5; 74:10; 94:3; 35:17. Moses in Deuteronomy 32:43 teaches the people of God thus to rejoice in their sufferings, “Rejoice O ye nations with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants and will render vengeance to his adversaries”.

Let the solemn words of the Saviour Himself as he foretold the coming fate of Jerusalem (where the prophets were always slain) -let His words suffice to show the justice of that cry for vengeance tom the altar of God:

“Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:

That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.” - Matthew 23:34-35

### WHITE ROBES FOR THE RIGHTEOUS DEAD

“And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.” (v.11)

This verse is full of gracious thoughts. Souls do not need white robes, but our symbolic Book is teaching us of the assured and blessed state of the departed saints. Truth is thus dramatised to impress on every Christian believer that death, whether by martyrdom or from whatever cause, is the end of all suffering and shame and sin. Nothing will sully our rest in that other world into which death introduces us. That world is not a world of oblivion as false cults have taught, but of conscious enjoyment of rest and felicity. It is not our final state, for the body in

which we suffered still lies in the grave - but what a glorious resurrection awaits! They who sleep in Jesus will not anticipate those who follow after in the final glory and bliss of the purified. Paul teaches that we shall not all sleep (that is, not all of us shall die) but we must all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the Last Trumpet. (1 Corinthians 15:51-54; see also 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18). In the great day of resurrection soul and body will be reunited. In one great moment the souls of the departed will be clothed again in those bodies which for so long have slept in the dust, and the living saints still alive on the earth at the coming of the Lord will not need to die, but will pass into the state of immortality. Our earthly bodies are reserved to a glorious destiny. They must be fashioned anew like unto the glorious body of the Lord who rose from the dead in the same body which went into the tomb - but a body now immune from death, glorified at the right hand of God.

Because the final reward of the righteous, as indeed the final judgment of the wicked, awaits the resurrection day, so the day of vengeance and recompense still delays till the great moment when all questions will be answered, all debts paid, and all rewards due realised.

What passes our comprehension is the dogged perseverance of some of our friends in the idea that the last trumpet is not the last trumpet, and the resurrection of the righteous described by Paul in the two passages referred to above relates only to a portion of the redeemed; that there is no general resurrection, and that the last day of the Church on earth is not the last day of the present cosmic order. On the contrary the resurrection day is the consummation of time. The righteous and the wicked must appear before the Throne of Judgment at one and the same moment, ranged according to Christ's words, as the divided communities of sheep and goats to right and left of the Judgment Throne there to receive publicly in the last assembly of the total creation of angels, men and devils, the verdict which the Righteous Lord must pronounce. (Matthew 24:31-46; John 5:28-29)

The Throne of Judgment, we agree, is itself a symbolic term to express the authority and nature of that great and final act in the long drama of creation, but whatever form the judgment may take, it must be one, final, and complete in terms of time and universality.

So the martyred saints are bidden to rest for "a little season" (it is but a little while in the light of eternity) till the mystery of God is completed, and in the period of waiting their white robes are the symbol of their innocence before God and the pledge that mercy and truth will in due time meet, and righteousness and peace kiss



each other.

“Here is the patience of the saints. Here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus”. (Revelation 14:12) This is what the Book of Revelation is about.

### NO DOCTRINE OF “SOUL-SLEEP”

The splendour of the thought lying within the figure of the white robes is anticipated by Paul in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians –

“For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.” - 2 Corinthians 5:1-4

The departed saints are constantly, from the moment of death, in the enjoyment of the glory of heaven. No doctrine of soul-sleep here. One cannot clothe nonentities in the garb of immortality. The saints go immediately to paradise and are in joy and felicity, as the Saviour said on the cross, to the dying thief, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise”. (Luke 22:43) No amount of mischievous distortion of those blessed words will yield any other meaning than that so simply expressed in our Authorised rendering. At such an awful moment no-one plays with words - least of all the dying Saviour.

The following observations will probably be found helpful to those who have any further difficulties with this great passage concerning the Fifth Seal.

The clothing of the martyred saints in glorious white array, does not mean they were unclothed till that moment, or that they and they only who have been actually martyred for Christ have an entitlement for such special investiture. We repeat that we are in the region of divine drama where truth is clothed in the language of symbol. What the robes represent is the instant privilege of all who depart this life in the faith of Christ.

So also the passage assures us solemnly that the sufferings of the Church are to be agelong. Only when the last generation of the Lord’s afflicted people is gathered

into the heavenly mansions, will the trumpet sound and the voice of the Lord be heard declaring to all creation, "IT IS DONE"! (Revelation 16:17) Till then, trial and affliction and the cross await us.

The garment is the heavenly glory given to the saints in anticipation of the fulness of glory into which they will be admitted at the consummation.

Therefore the saints above already enjoy consciously the blessing of heaven. What then is that higher glory or ultimate state which awaits? We answer with due reverence, but none the less with the utmost confidence based upon the concluding chapters of this same Book of Revelation. The awaited consummation, which cannot in the nature of things take place till all the redeemed are gathered in, is nothing less than THE NUPTIAL GLORY AND BLISS OF CHRIST WITH HIS BRIDE, THE CHURCH.

The Church of the Redeemed is one undivided Bride from the beginning to the end of time, from Abel till the last one is gathered in, every seat is occupied, and "the wedding is furnished with guests". (Matthew 22:11) "The guests" in the figuration of the parable are also the Bride: both represent the Church.

The marriage of Christ is what Creation is about. The mystery of God is wrapped up there. The reward of the Ever-Obedient Son, Eternal, Begotten before all worlds, the Expression of the Father's glory and the Bearer and Upholder of the Father's Name - His reward, we say, for His suffering obedience even unto death, is that He should have His Bride to share His throne and enjoy with Him, His Estate, to all eternity. Hers will be a bliss as eternal as God Himself, and all the trials and sufferings of earth will seem as nothing, in that union of unsullied love which is the rich estate of glory and beauty which He shares with her.

Man was made for Christ, and redeemed Man, made anew in the likeness of the Son, will reign with Him, and thus the purpose of Divine Creation, will be forever realised. Evil will not rise up a second time to mar our joy or dim His glory.

We await that breathless moment in faith and patience, being persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
(Romans 8:38-39)

## NOT THE “JEWISH REMNANT”

Most Futurist writers regard the martyrs of the Fifth Seal as being a ‘Jewish remnant’ existing during a meager period of three and a half years immediately prior to the Second Advent of Christ -scarcely, one would have thought, worthwhile to award them the consolations of a special robe of white as a temporary honour to keep them in a patient frame till the ‘tribulation’ period of 1260 days has expired. Yet this strange theory is maintained with the utmost confidence by preachers, and by the authors of a never ending stream of prognosticating pamphlets, to be devoured by the faithful who are at the same time assured that it has nothing to do with them or the age in which we now live, for whose martyrs over 2,000 years, there is no such consolation though their numbers must so far surpass the martyrs of a mere three and a half years, as to rob the latter of any comparable significance.

To such levels has ‘prophetical’ theory been reduced since the Irvingites of London took over the management of interpretation of the Book of Revelation 150 years ago. When (in the mercy of God) our exposition reaches the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of Revelation (where these martyrs for Christ in all ages reappear) we hope to prove our interpretation that not only has Antichrist been with us for 2,000 years past (and is still with us today), but that the final upsurge of evil in the Little Season of Satan’s unloosing makes nonsense of all millennial theories of a Golden Age of Christ’s personal reign on the earth. The so-called millennium is in fact the duration of Christ’s reign NOW over all the earth, and therefore the martyrs are no insignificant Jewish Remnant but the noble army of Christian martyrs, with the entire martyr Church of Christ comprising all its members from the beginning to the end who will not conform to this world or wear its mark. “He must reign TILL he hath put all enemies under his feet” and that is a task in which Christ has been engaged ever since the resurrection. He who reigns now in heaven, must also be reigning on earth, and needs not to remove His seat of authority from heaven’s eternal throne to an upholstered and temporary majesty on earth.

## THE SIXTH SEAL

“And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and

the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"

The description is not of the end of the world (though all judgments point to that final Assize) but the successive visitation of the divine vengeance on earth as God cleaves a path through history for His redeemed.

That the scene cannot be matched with the Last Judgment as such is obvious from the details given. The earthquake, the hiding of the sun, the blood red hue of the moon, the falling of the stars, describe events which taken collectively cannot belong to the cosmic universe. Stars do not fall to the earth. Some of them are larger than the entire solar system and the earth could not accommodate them. The displacement of mountains and islands is hardly the end of the world, else there would be no geography in which to fit them. The terror of the kings and captains, the rich and poor, the bond and free, at the stupendous cosmic ruin, so that they cry to the rocks to fall upon them and the hills to cover them, is scarcely relevant to a situation when heaven and earth are passing away in one great moment, and there are no rocks or mountains to heed the cry of the inhabitants. Peter gives us the true picture of the end of the cosmic creation when he tells us that the heavens shall be dissolved, the elements melt with fervent heat, and the earth and all its works shall be consumed. (2 Peter 3:10-12) There will be no warning of the impending end; Peter declares it will come as a thief in the night.

As usual John borrows his figures from the Old Testament. The dimming of sun and moon, the falling of stars, the removal of mountains and islands, the cry of the wicked for the hills to cover them - these are familiar Old Testament figures of the dissolution of empires, and the passing away of systems, powers, tyrannies.

Hengstenberg writes, "The shining of the heavenly lights is the symbol and the visible reflection of the grace of God. Hence its extinguishment by the sun and moon becoming dark, in storms and earthquakes, etc., is regarded as a prelude of severe judgments".

For the darkening of sun and moon as a figure of the eclipse or passing away of kingdoms, nations, or even churches, see Isaiah 24:23; "The moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed when the Lord shall reign in mount Zion ...."

- a prophecy of the superior light of the gospel dimming into obscurity the lesser light of the Law.

Jeremiah 15:9, “Her sun is gone down while it was yet day: she hath been ashamed and confounded: and the residue of them will I deliver to the sword ...” - a prophecy of the rejection of Israel because of the sin of unbelief.

Micah 3:6: “The sun shall go down over the prophets, and the day shall be dark over them” - the withdrawal of the light of inspiration from the prophets of Israel because of their unfaithfulness, prior to the coming of Christ in the gospel.

### JOEL’S PENTECOSTAL PROPHECY

One of the most striking of all this class of prophecy is in Joel 2:30-32:

“I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered.”

Yes, dear reader, here is the prophecy quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21) - so much misunderstood by the preachers and writers on prophetic themes, yet so clear and plain to those who use their Bibles wisely and compare scripture with scripture. Joel was prophesying that when Messiah comes to set up His kingdom, the signs thereof would be those same Pentecostal signs which brought the multitude together at the Temple in Jerusalem - the speaking in tongues and prophesying. Peter in his inspired address assured the people that this prophecy was being fulfilled that very day: “This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel...” This assurance from Peter was designed to have a double effect. To many it was to spell salvation as their listening ears heard and their eyes saw the long awaited tokens that God had visited His people and the promised days of Messiah had at last begun - even though Messiah had been crucified and rejected. Peter declared that the crucifixion was part of the divine plan of redemption – “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain; whom God hath raised from the dead....” (Acts 2:23-24)

To many more - even to the nation as a whole - the signs of Pentecost were to mark their ruin, for their unbelief over the next 40 years of national probation would terminate (as terminate it did in AD 70) in their complete overthrow and agelong

dispersion. This (in the prophecy of Joel) was their sun being turned into darkness and their moon into blood. The “signs in the earth beneath, blood and fire and vapour of smoke”, were Joel’s description of the judgments of God upon the ungodly and disbelieving nation.

Nevertheless, the door would always remain open to those of Israel, and of the rest of mankind, who by repentance and faith turned from their evil ways and “called upon the name of the Lord” for “whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved”. (Acts 2:21)

### STARS FALLING FROM HEAVEN

“And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind” - v.13.

The fundamental passage from which these words are taken is Isaiah 34:4-5: “And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree”. This chapter of Isaiah is of peculiar force and demands close attention. Our A.V. translators with their customary penetration have headed this chapter, “The judgments wherewith God revengeth his church. The desolation of her enemies The certainty of the prophecy.” (We strongly recommend all students of the Word to provide themselves with an Authorised Version of the Bible, with chapter headings and marginal references in full. They will find these much neglected aids, a mine of great spiritual worth. Our translators who were real scholars put them there for instruction and help in hard places).

Isaiah, chapters 34 and 35, bring to a close the first section of the Book of Isaiah. There follows the historic interlude (chapters 36-39) - upon which the understanding of Isaiah’s prophecy largely depends; thereafter, the second portion of the Book, chapter 40 to the end, commencing with the mission of John the Baptist and introducing the theme of the gospel which was to rule the Church till end of time, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.”

In chapter 34, the dissolution of the heavens and the falling of the stars is associated with the judgment of God on Jacob’s traditional enemy, Esau, here presented under his prophetic name of Idumea (Edom- ‘red’ - symbolic of his career of murder and blasphemy against the people of God). (See verses 5-8). As usual however, Edom does not stand exclusively for itself, but as the representative

of all that worldly power which hates the people of the Lord wherever it finds them. It is from this chapter that the Spirit of God takes the figure and conveys it to John in the vision of the Sixth Seal, for this is the consolation of the Lord's people, that whenever the wicked rise up against them, and the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will raise up a standard against them. In the second part of Isaiah we see (chapter 63) the Lord as a mighty conqueror coming from Edom with garments dyed in the blood of the foe – "For the day of vengeance is in my heart, and the year of my redeemed is come." (v.4)

"Jacob have I loved and Esau (Edom) have I hated" declares the Lord in Malachi 1:2-3 (the significantly last Book of the Old Testament) because Esau always stands as the opponent of the Church, envious, proud, bloodthirsty, a symbol of the Roman power which took up the role of Edom at the time John received his apocalyptic vision. And Esau still hates Jacob; the world always hates the people of God, as Christ warned His disciples ere He left the Upper Room for the cross, the grave and the throne (John 15:19-25).

John is the only one of the Four Evangelists who records the sayings of the Lord in the Upper Room. It was reserved for him to preserve the record and to set it down in writing in anticipation of the great conflict then beginning at Patmos, between the Church represented in John, and the power of this world. Yet they tell us that John did not write for the Church.

The Book of Revelation is full of the symbolism of 'stars' - falling or otherwise. Christ is the bright and morning star (Rev. 22:16); He is the star which Balaam prophesied should arise out of Jacob (Num. 24:17); He holds in His right hand the seven stars which are the angels of the Seven Churches (Rev. 1:20); a star falls from heaven to the earth (Rev. 9:1) and is discovered to be none other than Satan (v.11). The Church is represented in chapter 12 as a woman with a crown of twelve stars. A great star falls in chapter 8 verses 10-11. Its name is Wormwood, and its function is to make bitter all rivers and fountains of water - no doubt meaning that false doctrine which poisons the sources of light, life and truth upon which the soul of man depends, even the preaching of the Word of God. We are seeing not a little of that today.

The symbolism of the Book of Revelation is rich in meaning and the Church has lost much in our day through the arid literalism with which the subject of prophecy has been approached.

## THE ROLLING UP OF THE HEAVENS

“And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.” - v.14

The rolling up of the heaven is a continuation of the symbolism of the preceding verse. The stars of heaven having fallen to the earth, that is, the rulers and tyrants of this world's system, the heaven itself, their region of power and dominance over the world comes to an end. The mountains and islands being moved out of their places represent the consequent disorder among the nation as the central, controlling power for the time being is destroyed.

How often in history could those words be spoken (as spoken they were by a great British statesman at the time of the Napoleonic wars)- “Roll up that map of Europe: It will not be needed again in our time”? How much of the world has been fundamentally changed since the 20<sup>th</sup> century came in, by two world wars, and the fall of great powers which only a short time ago controlled the whole world the rise of other nations and powers - as in Africa and Asia - never before known as significant territories on the face of the earth. As oft as this upheaval takes place on the face of the globe, so the principle of this Seal comes into action. History presents a confusing pattern. Its rapid changes, revolutions, alliances, and tyrannies; the complex and unstable intricacies of its tapestry - make history the despair of the historians. Only the Christian, with the Book of Daniel, of Isaiah, of Revelation, in his hand, holds the key - and the key is always the inexorable progress of redemption to its foreordained conclusion. Moses declares in Deuteronomy that when God in His terrible judgments because of sin separated the sons of Adam and divided to the nations their inheritance, He set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel (Deut. 32:8) - that is, the one enduring object in all history, moving inexorably, indestructibly, onward down the avenue of time is THE CHURCH. All history is hers. For her the dispositions of the nations are made through the unfathomable working of the holy providence of God.

Nebuchadnezzar, under the judgment of God, confesses the same when he is compelled to say, “The most High ... doeth according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand or say unto him, What doest thou? ... His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation.” (Daniel 4:34, 35) Again, “The most High ruleth in the kingdom of men and giveth it to whomsoever he will ... the heavens do rule ....” (Dan. 4:25, 26)



Addressing the proud Athenians on Mars Hill, the apostle Paul declares, that God has determined the times before appointed, and even the bounds of the nations' habitations, to the end that they might seek after the Lord, if haply they might feel after him and find him (Acts 17:26-27).

The one irresistible force which drives through history is the Word of God - that is, the divine will and purpose, working out the problem of creation in terms of His eternal purpose of redemption. No nation or kingdom or empire can ever be secure or sacred. Even the people of Israel were rejected from their high privileges. "The city of God remaineth" sang Luther in his great hymn. And this is the theme of our Book of Revelation.

### MOUNTAINS - FALL ON US!

"And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come and who shall be able to stand?" (v. 15-16)

Bengel here is grand. He comments, "The very people who were least afraid on earth, who were themselves the most feared, and in this sought their glory and joy, stand foremost."

"How low, how little are the proud,  
How indigent the great ...."

- Thomas Gray

The entire picture in these two verses shows how the great and mighty, the leaders and notables of this world, are enumerated in the same condemnation with ordinary citizens, and even slaves and dependants, in the common terror when the Lord arises to shake terribly the earth. Earthquake, wind and fire are no respecters of persons, and often the great are the first in the judgment. Revolutions reverse the social order. As in France in 1793 or Russia in 1917, the great suddenly fall from their eminence and are plunged into poverty or death. Anarchy and violence take over from privilege and pomp. In these two pregnant verses of Revelation all classes alike suffer, for in the crash of empires and economic systems under the judgment of God, none can escape.

Again to quote Bengel, “The great (in these verses) are those who have most to say in matters of policy; they sit at the helm of the State, execute important commissions and other things of moment. In Spain they bear precisely the name of grandees, elsewhere of magnates, senators, members of Parliament, etc., and often indeed exercise more power than the kings themselves, and rule over the kings. The rich and the strong are often self-willed and insolent persons, full of confidence in themselves, and ask nothing after God the Almighty. Then come at last all bondmen and free. They know not whither to betake themselves. What in times of outward security were the most frightful places, those they now flee to for refuge, and that in vain. Sometimes in storm, lightning, thunder, tempest, even those who are naturally courageous and in fields of slaughter are undismayed, may be seized with fear and trembling because God causes something to appear of His majesty, although it is still the time of His forbearance. How shall it then be when the Almighty in full earnest strikes terror into His enemies?”

The immediate oppressor of the Church at the time of John’s vision was the empire of Rome. It was then at the very height of its power, the unchallenged ruler of the world. It was destined to remain so for generations to come, but its doom was already secretly written. There are few disasters in history so complete and terrifying as the downfall of Rome, when the three irresistible agents of the divine sovereignty - war, famine and pestilence, the three horsemen of providence, riding under the direct sovereignty of the Lamb - brought down the pride of the Caesars, and broke the power of heathenism for ever.

Other tyrannies were fated to rise in its place, but just as often, the principle of the divine rule under the Six Seals comes again into play, and a way is opened up for the Kingdom of Christ.

Micah recorded it all long ago:

“The Breaker (Christ) is come up before them (the Lord’s people). They have broken up and have passed through the gate and are gone out by it: and their King shall pass before them, and the Lord on the head of them.”

- Micah 2.13.

“When he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them ... I am the door of the sheep. By me if any man enter in he shall be saved, and shall go in and out and find pasture.”

- John 10:4-9

Isaiah 2:19 And they shall go into the holes of the rocks and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord and for the glory of his majesty when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth.

Hosea 10:8 The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, shalt be destroyed. They say to the mountains, Cover us, and to the hills, Fall on us.

Luke 23:30 (the Lord's warning of the impending destruction of Jerusalem): Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us.

### SUMMARY OF THE OPENING OF THE SEALS

By way of summary we take now a final view of the Opening of the Seals, to recapitulate what we have learned.

Dr. Scofield describes the Sixth Seal as 'anarchy' and not the scene of the Last Judgment, from which we conclude that he accepts the view that the description of fearsome natural events, such as the darkening of sun and moon, the fall of stars from the sky, and the rolling up of the heavens, are symbols of public events, the downfall of rulers and the overturning of nations, systems and empires.

We are glad to concur in this, though we add the caution that we regard the Sixth Seal as one which is continually in operation throughout history, and not an isolated or climacteric event at the end of time.

This Seal is God's ultimate answer to the tears of the persecuted saints. There will be a day of recompense, though it may be long delayed. The enemies of the Kingdom of Christ will not always triumph, but even in this world they will be made to taste again and again the vengeance and the terror of the Lord. The successive calamities thus falling on mankind will be but the prelude and the pattern of the last judgment. To put it more graphically, the Lord will move heaven and earth in defence of His people and for the final triumph of Christ in the gospel.

There was an immediate fulfillment of the judgment of this Seal in the case of the oppressive power of Imperial Rome, but the prophecy does not terminate there. The events of the Sealed Book are agelong in duration - conditions of God's judgment which are always with us. Every time a new antichristian power arises in the place of Imperial Rome this principle operates and provides deliverance for the persecuted Church.

Vitringa, with his eagle eye on the first of these great judgments writes, “The image of the heavens rolled together denotes the annihilation of the whole civil and ecclesiastical system of the empire of Rome.”

Readers will appreciate therefore that neither the historical method of interpreting Revelation, nor the Futuristic, can give the Book any practical application to those who read it ‘and keep its sayings’. The historical method has too often made the Book “as unedifying as an antiquated compend of ancient history.” (Hengstenberg). The Futuristic method does the same, except that it treats the events as belonging to history yet future. Only the principle of continuous fulfillment based on the recognition that in this prophetic Book we have the great principles of history at work all the time and in everyplace - only this can make the Book significant to the reader in any and every age.

### THE PAST APPLIES TO THE PRESENT

It is thus that all divine history in the Bible has its application to the Church in all ages. Are we not greatly interested and involved all that God has done in the remote past? The stories of the patriarchs, the Flood, Babel, the Old Testament chronicles and annals of the kingdom - all have a bearing on the Church’s life today and furnish material both sermonic and meditative to those who see in it the wisdom of God reproducing itself in situations which bear upon the practical living of Christian people. The Psalms of David are largely the outcome of the joys and sorrows, the trials, afflictions and triumphs of that ancient Israelitish king, but they are the very Word of God to all the tried and afflicted people of Christ today.

These ancient histories show the timeless principles of divine history - the wheels as it were on which the chariot of the divine providence moves down the avenue of time. We are admitted there into the inner mysteries of the holy sovereignty of God, and are taught in terms of practical living, the principles of faith, patience, and hope.

The dramatisation of these principles in the Book of Revelation is designed to impress the mind of the believer with the realities of Christ’s rule in the midst of His people - and, too, in the midst of His enemies (Psalm 110:2). The Book is not dictated to John. He records what he sees and hears, as in this chapter 6. There is a clap of celestial thunder. A horseman appears, followed by three terrible mounted figures in rapid succession. These are the agents of history. The first is the all-conquering Hero, Christ. They ride first for the overthrow of the Roman Empire, but they remain on the historic scene, ever at work in every age as the agents of

omnipotence for the chastisement, destruction or limitation of evil powers and systems. Through their agency a way is opened up for the escape and the enlargement of the people of God, as long ago in Egypt the successive plagues broke the power of Pharaoh and brought the people over the Red Sea dry-shod.

### PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS on the SEALED BOOK

Hengstenberg observes: “All the judgments mentioned here are directed to the one point of chastising and breaking the pride and insolence of the world, restraining its persecuting zeal, and converting out of it what is to be converted, and laying it at the feet of Christ the conqueror. The fulfillment pervades all history, and is ever renewing itself before our eyes. As often as the world’s hatred against Christ and His Church breaks forth anew, the commission is also again given to him who sits upon the pale horse, and whose name is death. It is a spectacle of fearful significance to see him riding on through centuries ... At the head of the whole we can see Christ marching forth as conqueror ... nothing can happen which does not disclose Christ as a conqueror.”

Bengel: We know not what sorrows may come upon the earth even in our days, and much yet remains to run its course. O, how needful it is for us to make sure indeed of the love of the Lamb and His gracious protection: Come what may, there shall assuredly be safety and blessing to His true people.

That book (the Sealed Book) reveals the sentence which is given by the Judge and by His counsellors against the enemies of the Church. The vast number of the divine sentences of condemnation is indicated in the parchment’s having been written within and without. (Schottgen)

Nothing takes place in the world and in the Church which has not been determined in God’s counsel and judgment. This may well administer the greatest consolation to the Church in times of trouble. (Vitringa)

Without tears the Revelation was not written; neither can it without tears be understood. (Bengel)

It forms a mighty bulwark against despair in the Church on account of the threatening power of the world. Should even the whole earth rise against her, Christ her head has the seven Spirits of God that are sent over the whole earth, and whose secret yet irresistible influence, often deeply concealed, nothing on earth can withstand however loftily it may exalt itself. (Hengstenberg)

## ADDENDUM

### The Church in Prophecy

Prophecy can only be understood according to the principles inherent in its nature and structure. There is nothing in prophecy which runs contrary to the requirement of faith in the receiving of it. The evangelical nature of prophecy is expressed by John in Revelation 19:10 – “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” The object of prophecy is to reveal Christ and bring the soul to faith in Him.

“Moses wrote of me” declared the Saviour (John 4:46) - and Bengel echoes, “Nowhere did Moses NOT write of Christ.”

The entire New Testament lay from the beginning in the matrix of the Old Testament, so that the child is the interpreter of the parent, and the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ is the natural outcome of the preparation of the Old Covenant. The neglect of this principle has led to the widespread and most destructive conclusion, dominating so much of evangelical thought and interpretation today, that the Church of the New Testament has no place in Old Testament prophecy, but is an unexpected and unprophesied interlude filling the gap in history created by Jewish unbelief. This conclusion, so vital the true understanding of Holy Scripture is largely built upon an entirely false and arbitrary interpretation of one text in the Ephesian Epistle – “The mystery which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God.” (Eph. 3:9)

Dr. C. I. Scofield in his Reference Bible has standardised the false interpretation that this “mystery” is the Church, whereas the context of the whole chapter, and indeed, the whole of Paul’s writings, make it clear beyond question that the “mystery” is the constitution of the Church as a mystical body in which Jew and gentile lose their separate identity and become one body - the body of Christ; and that this, the full revelation of divine grace in the redeemed Church, is the means by which God, from the foundation of the world designed to make known to all creation His “manifold wisdom” (that is, the fulness of the divine Being).

To allege, as Dr. Scofield and his innumerable disciples allege that this “Church” by which God all along determined to make Himself fully known was a kind of historic accident or expedient to tide over the time until God could renew His real purpose, which was to establish a temporary earthly kingdom for the Jew; to allege

such a theory as this and for it to be widely accepted by the Christian public and the Christian ministry, is to subvert the entire purpose of prophecy and deny the true mission of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

That which according to Paul was the grand purpose of God for the display of His eternal wisdom and Being can never be a mere historical and temporary stop-gap. If the N.T. Church is instituted according to “the eternal purpose which God purposed in Christ” (Eph. 3:11) then it cannot be a temporary expedient. It can only be the final, grand, enduring object upon which God’s love was set from the beginning.

The appalling and dangerous confusion which exists today in the evangelical world, in the false and artificial division made in certain prophetic “schemes”, making distinction between the Jewish people and “the Bride” of Christ, between the Church and Israel, and between the saints of one area of history and those of another, has fairly destroyed all semblance of consistency and profitableness in the exposition of the Word of God. A glance at the vast and colourful array of titles on the average evangelical bookshelf should be enough to convince the sober-minded that the situation is quite out of hand.

The Old Testament Israel was never designed by the wisdom of God to be other than a preliminary phase in divine history. The Church of the N.T., the true successor of the OT Church is the goal which the Lord always had relentlessly in view. The Church, which, through the incarnation and atonement of our Blessed Lord, grew out of the ashes of the OT kingdom is not only the object of all prophecy but is the full and final realisation of the holy purpose of God in creation.