

# FIFTH SEAL JUDGMENT POSTPONED

## JESUS BREAKS THE FIFTH SEAL BUT A JUDGMENT TO AVENGE MARTYRED SAINTS IS POSTPONED FOR A LITTLE WHILE

And when He broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained, and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And there was given to each of them a white robe, and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also (Revelation 6:9-11).

• **problem:** the content of this judgment is missing; that is, nothing bad happens to the unbelieving world in verses 9, 10, and 11. As we will see, this judgment is not waived, but is delayed or postponed, and its fulfillment is promised at a later date. So the question is: When is the fifth seal judgment fulfilled? And what does it consist of? Who is targeted? And how severe is it? I will attempt to answer these questions in the discussion that follows.

• **I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain:** the souls of these martyred tribulational saints are *below* the golden altar in God's throne room in heaven (6:9). The improper preposition *hypokato* indicates "a position below another position or object—'under' . . . 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's leftovers' Mk 7:28; . . . 'I saw you when you were under the fig tree' Jn 1:50" (Louw & Nida). Picture this: the souls of these martyred saints are standing on the floor (the sea of glass) in the throne room of the heavenly temple. The golden altar is elevated above the floor, and it's entirely likely that the thrones of Jesus and God the Father are elevated above the golden altar. These martyrs, then, are standing at an elevation lower than the golden altar and thrones of God and his Son, seated at God's right hand (Psa. 110:1; Matt. 26:64; Luke 22:69; Eph. 1:20; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22).

• **reasons for their martyrdom:** they were killed for two reasons: (1) **because of the word of God**, that is, because of their belief in God's Word, and (2) **because of the testimony which they had**, that is, because of their proclamation or witness to others about Jesus and God (6:9). They not only believe God's Word but are vocal about it. They're not closet Christians. In spite of the danger these witnesses have good reasons to believe: they're seeing Bible prophecy fulfilled almost every day! God's Word, the Bible, is their road map through the Tribulation. They know what's going to happen before it happens. They can predict what's next, warn others about it, and, when it comes true, their witness is confirmed and their faith is strengthened. Now, if the Bible accurately predicts the sequence of tribulational events, then the rest of the Bible—including soteriology—must also be true. So men believe the gospel, begin learning about God, serve him, and witness to others about the things they are learning and seeing with their own eyes. But the politicians and forces of Satan will make every effort to silence their witness. So they are persecuted and killed, but they will be greatly rewarded for their faithfulness unto death: "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:10-12). These martyred saints will rule with Christ in his millennial Kingdom: "And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (Rev. 20:4).

• **"How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"** After Jesus breaks the fifth seal the recently murdered saints ask when he is going to avenge them, apparently hoping it will be soon—maybe even in the next judgment (6:10). If the fifth seal judgment occurs relatively early in the first half of the tribulation, perhaps in the first quarter, then these martyrs have not been in heaven for long. **a little while longer** may be five or six years from the opening of the fifth seal.

• **postponed judgment:** Jesus grants their request: the fifth seal judgment *will* avenge them, but the vengeance or judgment is postponed "for a little while longer" (6:11). As a result the earth may have a short reprieve—unless Jesus immediately breaks the next seal. They are all given long white robes and told to rest a little while longer (6:11). Instead of vengeance they are given clothes! The Greek word *stole* is "a long, flowing robe. . . 'a young man sitting on the right and wearing a long white robe' Mk 16:5; . . . 'who like to walk around in long robes' Mk 12:38. The cultural significance of 'long robe' would be high social status and dignified occupation or activity" (Louw & Nida). **they were told that they should rest for a little while longer.** The verb *anapauomai* means "to become physically refreshed after ceasing activity or work—'rest, to rest.' 'let's go. . . to a quiet place and you can rest awhile' Mk 6:31. . . In the use of *anapauomai* and *anapausis*, the focus of meaning seems to be upon the restorative character of rest rather than mere cessation of activity" (Louw & Nida). After enduring severe persecution on earth, they certainly are resting mentally and physically in heaven. But this rest no doubt also includes faith-rest: they are to quit fretting and have faith in God's promise of future vengeance. Faith. Rest. Wait. It's important to note that the faith-rest technique exists on earth *and in heaven* until all of God's promises are fulfilled! Perhaps this rest also refers to what they're doing or not doing in heaven during the Tribulation: they're resting instead of working. Since tribulational saints are not judged until the beginning of the Millennium at the Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31-40), it's possible that no jobs or service have been assigned to them yet. Maybe they're resting, seeing the sights, visiting with friends, and, as here, worshiping in the heavenly Temple. Now, according to our text in Revelation, vengeance and judgment will take place when the number of martyrs is complete (6:11). And, since martyrdom continues unabated until the destruction of Babylon at the end of the Great Tribulation, the postponed fifth seal judgment cannot occur before the fall of Babylon. Why? Because the city is responsible for "all who have been slain on the earth" (cf. 18:20, 24). The blood of the saints is avenged *after* the beast (Antichrist) and the ten kings destroy Babylon (19:2-3). The fifth seal judgment, then, *is* the judgment of ecclesiastical (chapter 17) and political (chapter 18) Babylon!

• **postponed until the end of the Tribulation:** or more precisely, postponed until *after* the seventh bowl judgment. When this judgment is completed (16:17-21), John sees "the judgment of the great harlot" (17:1), which is the city of Babylon (17:5). Much more space is given to this judgment than to any other (17:2-19:4)—showing how angry God is over the mistreatment of his servants! She is "drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus" (17:6). The judgment of Babylon avenges these saints: "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her" (18:20). In this judgment, near the very end of the Great Tribulation, God avenges *all* tribulational martyrs: "And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth" (18:24). And, finally, a great multitude in heaven praises God for avenging these faithful martyrs: "After these things I heard, as it were, a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; BECAUSE HIS JUDGMENTS ARE TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS; for He has judged the great harlot who was corrupting the earth with her immorality, and HE HAS AVENGED THE BLOOD OF HIS BOND-SERVANTS ON HER'" (19:1-2). This vengeance was promised in 6:9-11 and is the *content* of the postponed fifth seal judgment. Avenging the saints is the grand finale of God's judgments during the Tribulation (chapters 6-19). And it is eclipsed only by the next event—the second coming of Jesus Christ (19:11-21).

• **terminus ad quem:** How long must they wait? **until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also.** In other words, until all who are going to be martyred are martyred. They are all fellow-servants (*sundouloi*) of God and brothers (*adelphoi*) in the family of God. And one of them will be the last martyr. This is the answer to their question: "How long, O Lord?" (6:10).