

Vision of martyr-church ruling and judging

The next sub-unit in this section is Revelation 20:4–10. In verses 4–6 John sees a vision of the martyr-church ruling and judging. ⁴*Then I saw thrones and people were sitting on them, and judgement 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. They had not worshipped the beast, nor his image, and they had not received the mark on their forehead or on their hands. They came to life and they reigned with Christ a thousand years.* Once again the phrase ‘Then I saw’ does not demand that, in the historical fulfilment of the vision, 20:4–6 takes place after 20:1–3. On the contrary it is likely that 20:1–3 and 20:4–6 are two units both describing the same period. There is a new unit of visionary experience, but it does not mean that in what it refers to, one is after the other.

• *Similarities with Revelation 6:9*

There are similarities between this passage and Revelation 6:9. The two passages are so close that they must be referring to the same situation.

I saw underneath the altar the souls of the people who had been slaughtered because of the word of God and because of the testimony that they had maintained.

I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God.

Vision shows the need to lay down one’s life for Jesus

• *Vision saw those who had died for their faith*

• *Souls – blood – crying out for justice*

• *Martyrs ask for vindication*

• *Given a white robe and told to wait*

• *White robe – vindication and honour and maybe a resurrection body*

Back in Revelation 6, the vision was making the point that the progress of Jesus’ church will involve laying down one’s life for the Lord Jesus Christ, sometimes quite literally. John saw a vision of those who had died for their faith in Jesus. He saw ‘souls’. I argued before, in chapter 23, that one must not stress the word ‘soul’ too much as if it must refer to something disembodied. It is likely that what John actually saw (in vision) was blood. ‘The life [soul] of the flesh is in the blood’^{□1} and in sacrifice blood is poured out at the base of the altar in a temple. It is at the base of the altar that John saw ‘souls’ crying out. We should be familiar with the idea of blood crying out for justice^{□2}.

Revelation 20:4 picks up from the distressing scene in chapter 6. The martyrs are asking for vindication. ‘They cried out with a loud voice, “How long, sovereign Lord, holy and true, will it be before you judge the people who live on the earth? How long will it be before you demand justice against them, because of our blood?”’^{□1} Then they were each given a white robe. It was said to them that they should rest yet for a little time longer until the number of their fellow-servants and of their brothers and sisters (who were to be killed just as they had been killed) was completed’^{□2}.

In Revelation 6, the martyrs are given a white robe and are asked to wait patiently for final justice. What is the ‘white robe’? It is vindication and honour. As I said before: ‘Perhaps it is also a resurrection body given before the final day of resurrection when the resurrection will be publicized before the universe. Resurrection is connected with reward and vindication in biblical thinking’ (see Part 23).

□1 Leviticus 17:11

□2 as in Genesis 4:10

□1 6:10

□2 6:11

• *The entire triumphant and victorious church – martyr church*

• *The church is always a martyr-church if it is faithful at all*

• *All faithful Christians are faithful unto death*

Two categories of people in the vision:

(i) *Those faithful to Jesus but not actually killed*

(ii) *Those actually killed for their faith*

• *The beheaded stand for all the martyrs*

• *The church defined by*
 (i) *Loyalty to the Word of God*
 (ii) *Separation from the persecuting religion of the state-authorities*

All of this should help us as we come to Revelation 20:4–6. Who are these people in verses 4–6? They are surely the entire triumphant and victorious church that has moved on to heaven – pictured as a martyr-church. In the book of Revelation the church is **always** viewed as a martyr-church (although the backslidden Christian does not live up to the description). Some of the Christians who have died were actually martyred; ‘Antipas . . . was put to death . . . ’ ^{☐1}. Many were ready to be martyred; Jesus said to them during their lifetime: ‘you must be faithful to death . . . ’ ^{☐2}. But in one way or another the church is always a martyr-church if it is faithful at all. Jesus says to all Christians: ‘the person who loses his life will find it.’ In one way or another, every faithful Christian is a martyr – a witness who is faithful unto death!

In Revelation 20:4 there are at least two categories of people in one vision. ‘Then I saw thrones and [i] people were sitting on them . . . And I saw [ii] the souls of those who had been beheaded . . . ’ There seem to be two sub-divisions: (i) those who were faithful to the point of death and are now reigning with Christ – but were not **actually** killed, and (ii) those who were **actually** killed in one way or another for the Lord Jesus Christ. The people as a whole are the entire company of the faithful believers who have left this life in the course of overcoming Satan and bringing the church victory and success (according to 20:1–3). It is not totally literal. The beheaded people are the symbols and representatives of the persecuted church, who have now left this life. Actually in the first century some would have been martyred by **other** modes of execution. But in the vision the beheaded stand for all the martyrs, and even for all the church. All the church must suffer tribulation either in person or in sympathy with the others. This glorious church is defined in several ways: (i) they are loyal to the word of God. They have suffered ‘on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the word of God’. (ii) They have separated themselves from the persecuting religion of the state-authorities. They ‘had not worshipped the beast and his image’ and ‘had not received the mark of the beast on their foreheads or on their hands’. Now it is the time for their reward. They ‘came alive and reigned with Christ a thousand years’. But what is their reward and when do they get it?

☐1 2:13b

☐2 2:10



Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)* books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



These specially reformatted chapters “Slices of Bread” produced by Sovereign World Trust are available in three categories as set out below

Slices for the Nations	Slices for Sponsors	Slices for Everyone / Slice of the Week
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For pastors, libraries and colleges in those parts of the world where resources are scarce and unaffordable In the fullness of time the whole series will be made available free of charge Weekly emailings of 3 - 4 Slices or available to download from the <i>Slices</i> web site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For those in more prosperous circumstances who can afford to contribute to the development of this material and its distribution with a small monthly donation The same material as Slices for the Nations Weekly emailings of 3 - 4 Slices or by download from the <i>Slices</i> web site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For those who wish to sample the material or dip into it from time to time, a proportion of the PTTB series is available free of charge Slices for Everyone (as a download) or Slice of the Week (attached to a weekly email) The remainder of the PTTB material is available to Sponsors and those eligible to receive Slices for the Nations

To subscribe please contact: slicesofbread@sovereignworldtrust.org.uk stating which category fits your situation. Further details are at www.slices.org.uk
 Details of the availability of *Preaching Through The Bible* books and how they may be purchased can be found on www.ibtr.org.uk