

*Seal five:
Martyrs used by
Jesus to
progress the
kingdom*

• *To advance the
kingdom*

• *Souls at the
base of the altar
cry out for justice*

That the four seals and four horses refer (as I have suggested) to the sufferings of the church seems to be confirmed in the case of the fifth seal which makes this point very explicit. **The fifth seal shows clearly the purpose of the Lord Jesus Christ to use martyrs in the progress of his kingdom.**

⁹*Then when the Lamb opened the fifth seal, 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.* This section of the book of Revelation is 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 sees a vision of those who have died for their faith in Jesus. He sees 'souls'. One might ask exactly what it was that he saw since we generally think of a 'soul' as being invisible. Actually one must not stress the word 'soul' too much as if it must refer to something disembodied. Some people might be surprised to know that the word 'soul' may even mean 'corpse' (the Hebrew of Numbers 6:11 speaks of 'a soul' when it means a corpse – see verse 9). It is likely that what John actually saw, in vision, was blood, since 'the soul of the flesh is in the blood' (as the Hebrew of Leviticus 17:11 may be literally translated) and in sacrifice blood is poured out at the base of the altar in a temple. It is at that base of the altar that John sees the 'souls'. In verse 10, *They cried out with a loud voice . . .* We are familiar with the idea of blood crying out for justice (as in Genesis 4:10).

¹⁰*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?'*

¹¹*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.*

• *Lives laid down
because of their
faith in Jesus*

We remember that Jesus is King and Priest. Revelation chapters 4–5 introduced us to a heavenly palace where God has his throne. But palace and temple are much the same thing. God's palace is his temple. So there is an altar there. John sees underneath the altar the souls of the people who had been slaughtered because of their loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ. There have been many people who have laid down their lives in sacrifice because of their faith in Jesus. When blood was poured on the altar in an ancient temple it was poured upon the bottom of the altar.

• *Asked to wait
patiently for final
justice*

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. Perhaps it is also a resurrection body given before the final day of resurrection when the resurrection will be publicized before the universe.^a Resurrection is connected with reward and vindication in biblical thinking. It is not the end of the world but the martyrs are alive and conscious. The teaching here contradicts the idea that the dead 'sleep' in the sense of being unconscious. ('Fall asleep' sometimes means 'die', but it is only a metaphor expressing the idea that the person will in resurrection 'wake up' and we shall be with him again¹; it does not imply 'soul sleep'.) The inhabitants of heaven long for the completion of God's kingdom, but the martyrs must wait before full vindication comes; there are yet more sufferings to be undergone before the church comes to its final victory.

• *There are yet
more sufferings to
be undergone
before the church
comes to its final
victory*

¹ see Daniel 12:2 and Mark 5:39

Seal six: the end of the world and preparation for judgement

The sixth seal is the end of the world and the final preparation for judgement. John tells us: ¹²*Then I watched as the Lamb opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of goats' hair. The full moon became like the colour of blood.* ¹³*The stars of heaven fell to the ground, like earth, just as a fig tree drops its unripe figs when it is shaken by a great wind.* ¹⁴*The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up. Every mountain and island were moved out of the places where they had been.* ¹⁵*Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the military generals, the rich, and the mighty, and every slave and every free person hid themselves in caves and in the rocks of the mountains.* ¹⁶*They call to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us, and hide us from the face of the Person that is sitting on the throne. Hide us from the wrath of the Lamb.* ¹⁷*For the great day of their wrath is come; and who is able to stand?'*

• *The fabric of the universe – breaking up*

In John's vision **the fabric of the universe is seen breaking up.** Revelation 6:12–14 is symbolic, not literal, for a star is actually bigger than the earth and cannot 'fall to the ground' literally. The passage records a vision.

• *The wicked run for their lives in extreme terror on the day of God's judgement*

The wicked run for their lives in extreme terror in the day of God's judgement. John's first five seals describe the sufferings of the church throughout much of world history. The sixth seal describes the day when the church begins to be vindicated. Revelation 6:15 tells us how powerful people who have often been the persecutors of the church now face the presence of the Father and the Son, the One on the throne and the Lamb. The very presence of God and of Jesus is terrifying to them. When Jesus appears his holiness will shine out in radiance. All impurity of any kind will shrink back at his presence.

• *The church - vindicated*

The 'wrath of the Lamb' is an extraordinary phrase. Lambs are known for their meekness and gentleness, not for their anger. But if Jesus is not received as a Saviour he will be presented to us as our Judge.

• *The wrath of the Lamb!*

Note

a. See the comments on 2 Corinthians 5:1 in *1 & 2 Corinthians* (IBTB, 2011), chs. 93–95.



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