

"THE FIFTH AND SIXTH SEALS"

I. Introduction

- A. We are in the midst of our study of the visionary sequence of the opening of the seven-sealed scroll, which is symbolic of God's comprehensive plan of salvation and judgment.
 - 1. We saw last week that the opening of the first four seals resulted in the outpouring of the woes that characterize life in our fallen world, even as the gospel advances through the church's Spirit-empowered ministry.
 - 2. The first four seals are a unit unto themselves because each of them features a horse and its rider.
 - 3. Seals five and six also form a unit because the sixth describes the fulfillment of the plea that is expressed by the martyred saints after the opening of the fifth seal.
- B. As we study this text this evening, we will see how it calls our attention to two important truths.
 - 1. First, the opening of the fifth seal shows us that the church's identity during the period in between Christ's first and second comings is that of a suffering church.
 - 2. Second, the opening of the sixth seal shows us the terrifying and hopeless future that awaits those who belong to the world on the day of Christ's return.

II. A Suffering Church (9-11)

- A. We begin by looking at the fifth seal.

1. John says that when this seal is opened, he sees the souls of those slain for their faithfulness to the word of God under the altar.
 2. There are a number of important things to say about this image.
 3. To begin with, we should note what this tells us about the state of believers after they die.
 4. It is legitimate to conclude from this that the souls of believers continue to have a conscious existence after they are separated from their bodies at death.
 5. This is consistent with other Scripture passages that speak of the what theologians refer to as the intermediate state, the state of a believer's existence in between his or her death and the resurrection of the dead on the last day.
 6. Contrary to the position known as "soul sleep," which says that the soul does not have a conscious existence when it is separated from the body, the Bible represents believers enjoying a conscious life of communion with God after they die and prior to the resurrection of their bodies.
- B. The souls that John sees in his vision are the souls of martyrs, those who were slain because of their witness to the word of God.
1. "Slain" is the same term that was used to describe Jesus back in chapter 5.
 2. These saints have followed in the footsteps of their Lord.
 3. And because all Christians are called to take up their cross, follow Christ, and lose their life for his sake, these martyrs are representative of the church as a whole.
 4. The Greek word that is translated in verse 9 as "witness" is *marturia*, from which we get our English word 'martyr.'

5. Those who bear faithful witness to Christ and his gospel will in one way or another have the world pitted against them.
 6. As Paul told Timothy in his second epistle to him, “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Tim. 3:12)
 7. Those words are confirmed with each passing century.
 8. In fact, the twentieth century saw more Christians put to death for their faith than in the previous nineteen centuries combined.
 9. And even when the world’s opposition does not result in literal martyrdom, in a spiritual sense, every faithful Christian is a martyr.
 10. This is closely related to what Paul is talking about in Romans 12 when he exhorts us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God.
 11. Our Lord calls us to place a higher value on his name and his kingdom than we do on our own lives.
- C. It is significant that the souls that John sees are located underneath the altar in the heavenly sanctuary.
1. The temple in Jerusalem had two altars: the altar of burnt offering and the altar of incense.
 2. The only other references to an altar in Revelation refer to something that corresponds to the temple’s altar of incense.
 3. You may recall that, back in chapter 5, the burning of incense was said to be symbolic of the prayers of the saints.
 4. It is fitting that these martyrs are resting beneath an altar that is symbolic of prayer.
 5. It symbolizes that their prayers have not been rejected by God.

6. Even though they were put to death for their faith, their plea for justice is heard.
 7. This is confirmed by what we are told in chapter 8, where the altar of incense is the source of the fire of judgment that an angel casts down upon the earth.
- D. These souls cry out to God with a loud voice, saying, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"
1. Some people contend that this prayer is un-Christian, arguing that it fails to conform to the pattern set by Jesus when he prayed from the cross that God would forgive those who put him to death.
 2. The problem with that argument is that the martyrs are asking for something that Jesus himself commended as a subject of prayer.
 3. In Luke 18, after telling the parable of the persistent widow, Jesus said, "will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily." (Luke 18:7-8 ESV)
 4. The martyrs in our text are not praying for personal vengeance.
 5. They are praying for justice and for the honor of God's name.
 6. Remember, they were put to death because of their witness to the word of God.
 7. And while they themselves have now been freed from all suffering, the church on earth is still being persecuted.
 8. Here we see them expressing their longing for God's people to be vindicated and for God's name to be glorified on the earth.
 9. They are praying for what we pray for when we say "Thy kingdom come," in the Lord's Prayer.

10. They are asking that the kingdom of glory may be hastened.
- E. Notice also how the martyrs refer to the unbelieving world that put them to death.
1. They call them “those who dwell on the earth.”
 2. The reason why this stands out is because there are still Christians dwelling on the earth.
 3. But the words of the martyrs remind us that our true home as Christians is not in this world.
 4. As Paul tells the Christians in Philippi, “our citizenship is in heaven.” (Phil. 3:20)
 5. Though we live in this world, we live in it as pilgrims, and our treasure is not to be bound up with this world.
 6. We are called to keep a loose hold on the things of this world.
 7. We are to set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.
- F. John tells us that after the martyrs offer their prayer, they are each given a white robe and are told to rest a little while longer until their number is complete.
1. The white robe is symbolic of the fact that the souls of believers are made perfect in holiness at their death.
 2. Try to imagine what that will be like.
 3. Even though we already have a righteous standing with God through the grace of justification, we are not yet perfectly righteous.
 4. For as long as we live in this world, no matter how much we advance in our sanctification, we always find that sin is right there

clinging so closely to us.

5. Even our best works are tainted by the pollution of our sin.
 6. But when we die and enter into the intermediate state, even though we will not yet be in our final, glorified state in our resurrected body, our soul will be made entirely pure and righteous.
- G. The instruction for the martyrs to rest until the number of their fellow servants is complete is a call to wait until the time when Christ's kingdom will be consummated.
1. That day will not arrive until the full number of the martyrs are slain, or until the full measure of the suffering that God has decreed for his church is reached.
 2. More broadly, the last day will only come when every one of the elect have been brought into the kingdom and thus made sharers in Christ's sufferings.
 3. It is good for us to be reminded that this is the only reason why the curtain has yet to fall upon this present age.
 4. The day of judgment is being held back because God's purposes for his church have yet to be completed.
 5. Yet the day of judgment's arrival is certain, because God is certain to finish his work of redemption.
 6. This should motivate us to persevere in our witness, even as it results in opposition and suffering.

III. The Great Day of God's Wrath

- A. We turn now to the opening of the sixth seal, which results in the coming of what is referred to in verse 17 as the great day of God's wrath.
1. This seal introduces the inauguration of the day of judgment.

2. Here we are given a picture of God's response to the martyrs' plea for justice.
 3. The judgment of the world is depicted by using images drawn from the Old Testament, images that portray God's judgment in terms of cosmic dissolution.
 4. While these images may not be intended as literal depictions of what will take place on the last day, they are clearly symbolizing a cosmos that is crashing down.
 5. The key idea is that the world, the place that is the focus of the earth-dwellers happiness and security and purpose, is being brought to nothing.
 6. This underscores the folly of living for this world.
 7. As the writer of Ecclesiastes so powerfully reminds us, life in this present age is vaporous and fleeting.
- B. It may also be significant that six parts of the world are depicted as being destroyed here, and that six classes of people are described as being judged.
1. And this takes place at the opening of the sixth seal.
 2. In Revelation, six is the number of imperfection because it falls short of seven.
 3. This is why the triple six is the number of man and the number of the beast that man worships.
 4. The groupings of six in connection with the sixth seal may place further emphasis upon the fact that man will be utterly undone when judgment day arrives.
- C. As John describes those who are in dismay at the opening of the sixth seal, he includes all classes of people.

1. They range from the most powerful and influential, to the most weak and ordinary.
 2. No one who put his hopes in this world rather than in Christ is left out.
 3. And these people are in sheer terror.
 4. They try to hide themselves from God's wrath, preferring being crushed under the weight of a mountain rather than have to face the divine Judge.
 5. This brings to mind how Adam and Eve tried to hide from God after they sinned by eating the forbidden fruit.
 6. Their efforts were futile, and so are the efforts of the earth-dwellers here.
 7. For one thing, the mountains that they want to use as a source of refuge were just said to be removed.
 8. For another, there is no place in the entire universe where we can hide from God.
 9. The creation is a vast realm to us, but it is a mere drop in a bucket to the one who spoke it into existence.
- D. We should also note that the earth-dwellers lament their fate by describing their judgment as a matter of being exposed to the wrath not only of the one seated on the throne, but also the wrath of the Lamb.
1. When Christ came into the world the first time, he came in a state of humiliation and meekness.
 2. When he returns at the last day, he will come in all his glory and power.

3. What a dreadful thing it will be for people to have the Lamb come against them in his wrath.
 4. As John Beeke observes, "There is nothing more frightening than the face of perfect love turned against you." [232]
 5. This reminds us of the most important thing of all.
 6. If you will not have Jesus Christ as your Savior, you will have him as your Judge.
 7. Those who have the Lamb as their Judge are left without a Savior, because the Lamb is the only Savior.
 8. Those who do not take refuge in Christ will have no place to hide from his wrath on the last day.
 9. As the earth-dwellers put it in verse 17, "the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"
- E. Those words are actually a bridge to the next chapter of Revelation.
1. Chapter 7 is an interlude in between the sixth and seventh seals.
 2. And during this interlude, after we have seen the final judgment being inaugurated and just before we see it consummated, we are shown that there are some people who will be able to stand when the day of judgment arrives.
 3. Those upon whom God sets his seal, those who belong to Jesus Christ and put their trust in Christ, they will be saved.
 4. But apart from him, as we see so powerfully in this text, there is no hope.
 5. This is why we must continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope that we have heard and that we profess.