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Under the Altar Revelation 6:9-11

These two individuals pictured here are Jim Elliot and Nate Saint.

They were evangelical Christian missionaries to Ecuador attempting to evangelize the Waodani people through efforts known as Operation Auca.

Along with three others (Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, and Pete Fleming), they made contact from their airplane with the Waodani Natives using a loudspeaker and a basket to pass down gifts.

After several months, these men decided to build a base a short distance from the natives' village, along the Curaray River.

They were approached one time by a small group of natives and even gave an airplane ride to a curious native whom they called "George".

Encouraged by these friendly encounters, they began plans to visit the Waodanis, without knowing that George had lied to the other natives about the missionaries' intentions.

Their plans were preempted by the arrival of a larger group of 10 warriors, who killed Jim Elliot and his four companions on January 8, 1956.

These five men were martyred in their attempt to share the Gospel of Christ with these un-reached natives.

Since the time of Stephen, the first martyr for Christ, there have been many martyred Christians in every generation.

In the last century there have been thousands who have been martyred for Christ in Asia, in Africa, and in Central and South America.

But this cannot compare to a dreadful future time of widespread martyrdom that Revelation 6:9-11 introduces us to.

In this fifth seal judgment the scene shifts from earth back to heaven, and John sees a vision of those who will be martyred for their faith in Christ.

While you are turning to Revelation 6:9-11, let me quickly review through some essential context that we have examined previously, but is necessary to review.

Remember as we have already examined, the Apostle John has been exiled on the Island of Patmos.

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This Island was a prison colony off the coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). While exiled on Patmos, John received a revelation from God through a vision of the glorified Christ.

Remember that the key verse of this vision/book was given in **Revelation 1:19**, which provides us with the outline or structure to the book of Revelation.

Christ says to John, “***Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.***”

The things, which you have seen refers to John’s vision of Christ in Revelation 1.

The things, which are refers to the status of the church at the time of John’s exile as described in Revelation 2-3.

While, ***the things, which will take place after these things*** is a reference to the remainder of the book of Revelation (chapters 4-22) and these chapters speak of future things; the end times; the last days.

Remember in Revelation 4 and 5, the apostle John was transported spiritually into the reality of heaven to witness the unfolding of end time events.

John records a heavenly worship service where many are worshipping God the Father on His heavenly throne, and Christ the Lamb, Who was the only one found worthy to open the seven-sealed scroll of God’s judgment.

Remember in Revelation chapter 6, the focus shifted from worship in heaven to judgment poured out upon the earth as chapters 6-18 focus on end time events associated with a time of God’s judgment known as the Tribulation Period.

Remember in Revelation 6:1-8, John was given a vivid symbolic description of literal events that will take place on the earth during the first half of the tribulation period.

- 1) Remember with the opening of the first seal, there will be a rise of false messiahs culminating in the rise of the antichrist and his pseudo peace through a covenant with Israel.
 - 2) Remember with the opening of the second seal, there will be world-wide warfare and bloodshed breaking out as supposed peace and prosperity will turn to conflict.
 - 3) Remember with the opening of the third seal, there will be a devastating world-wide famine. A full days salary will barely buy food for one person for one day.
 - 4) Remember with the opening of the fourth seal, ¼ of the earth's population will perish as a result of war, famine, disease, and wild beasts.
- Clearly these first 3 1/2 years of the tribulation period will be very destructive and devastating,

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but this is only the beginning birth pangs of God's judgment upon the world.

This morning we will continue by examining the fifth seal judgment in Revelation 6:9-11. **Let's Read!**

After the breaking of the 5th seal by the Lamb, we do not see a direct judgment of God carried out on the earth.

Rather, John has another vision of heaven in which he sees the souls of slain individuals under the altar of God.

As we examine Revelation 6:9-11, there are three elements that we must take note of as the fifth seal judgment is broken.

What three elements are revealed with the breaking of the fifth seal that we must take note of?

1. First, we must notice the people that are revealed (Revelation 6:9).

John writes in Revelation 6:9, *“When the Lamb 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...”*

There are three questions that must be answered regarding the people revealed here in Revelation 6:9.

a. First, who are the people that are revealed here?

Notice that, John says that he saw the *souls of those who had been slain*.

The term for *souls* is a general term translated either “life” or “soul.”

The word is used primarily in two ways: (1) as a reference to life in general or (2) as a reference to the seat or center of the inner life of man, which is equated with the spirit.

The term for *slain* is the same term applied to Christ three times in Revelation 5:6, 9, and 12 in regards to his sacrificial death.

The point that John is making here is that these individuals he sees under the altar have been killed. Like the Lamb in Revelation 5, they have also been put to death.

Clearly these are martyred saints, but the question arises as to when were these saints slain?

Since, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is quite clear that all believers *in Christ* at the time of the rapture receive resurrected bodies. The slain souls of Revelation 6:9 cannot be church age saints/pre-tribulation saints.

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So these slain souls are either Old Testament saints or those who will become believers during the tribulation and are martyred for their faith in Christ, in other words tribulation saints.

There are two insights that can be drawn from the context of Revelation 6 that will help identify these slain souls.

First, notice that according to verse 10 they are waiting on God to avenge their blood against those who dwell upon the earth.

It becomes quite clear that these believers who have martyred are still dwelling on the earth during the tribulation period.

Second, notice that according to verse 11, this martyrdom is incomplete. They must wait a little while longer until the martyrdom of their fellow servants is complete.

These two points demonstrate that these slain souls are believers who are martyred during the tribulation period.

This martyrdom begins during the first half of the tribulation. How do we know this?

Remember that the seal judgments of Revelation 6 parallel our Lord's chronology of the tribulation events in His Olivet Discourse given in Matthew 24.

The event that marks the mid-point of the tribulation period is referred to as the abomination of desolation mentioned in Matthew 24:15 (Daniel 9:27).

The reference by Jesus to this martyrdom in Matthew 24:9 indicates that it will begin during the first half of the tribulation.

The reference to the martyrdom not being complete in Revelation 6:11 suggests that the martyrdom will continue on into the second half of the tribulation period.

The number of those who are martyred is quite numerous according to Revelation 7:9-14.
(READ)

b. Second, where are the people that are revealed?

Notice that John saw the souls of those who had been slain underneath the altar.

The question is what altar is John referring to here in this verse, because the text does not define which altar is in view.

The altar John saw in heaven is most likely emblematic of the altar of incense in the Old Testament.

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We are first introduced to the altar of incense in Exodus 40:5.

It says, “**Moreover, you shall set the gold altar of incense before the ark of the testimony...**”

The reason this is most likely in view is the fact that the altar of incense is often associated with prayer.

Even in the book of Revelation in both Revelation 5:8 and 8:3-4 the prayers of the saints are likened to incense.

And according to Leviticus 4:7 some of the blood of the sacrifice was poured over the horns of the altar of incense.

So, John as he so often does draws off from Old Testament imagery here. He has been given a vision of the martyred tribulation saints in which their souls are under an altar, which is symbolic of the altar of incense.

But he does not stop here. He goes on to answer one final question that must be answered.

c. Third, why are these people revealed here?

John gives two reasons why these souls are slain and under the altar. He says in verse 9, “**because of the word of God, and because of the testimony, which they had maintained.**”

It is quite clear what the **Word of God** is. It is the Bible; Genesis to Revelation.

These individuals will correctly interpret what they see going on around them in the light of the Scripture.

They will likely proclaim from the Bible, God’s judgment and call on people to repent and believe the gospel.

However, those unbelievers who dwell upon the earth during this time will not tolerate their bold proclamation of the Word and will seek to persecute and kill them.

They are not only killed because of the Word of God, but also because of their testimony, which they had maintained.

A **testimony** is often viewed as personal knowledge or experience that is used as evidence in a court of law.

These believers will speak of their own personal relationship with Christ in conjunction with the Word of God.

These tribulation believers will boldly speak the truth of God’s Word and share their personal testimony with those around them, and as a result they will face the life-threatening hatred and hostility from the unbelieving world.

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They will be persecuted and killed for their faith in Christ. Just as Jesus says in Matthew 24:9, ***“Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.”***

This is really nothing new. Since the time of Stephen, the first martyr recorded in Acts 7, faithful men and women of Christ have been persecuted and put to death.

Christ teaches that this is a blessing as He says in Matthew 5:10-12, ***“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”***

As believers in Christ we are also called on to proclaim the truth of God’s Word, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

However, the result may not always be pleasant. We might face insult, hatred, hostility and possibly even persecution. And in some cases as with Jim Elliot, we might even face death. But, Christ’s instructions are clear; we should rejoice and be glad for our reward in heaven is great!

Not only should we take note of the people that are revealed in the fifth seal, but

2. Second, notice the petition that is requested (Revelation 6:10).

John goes on to say in verse 10, ***“and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”***

By making this petition, they are not trying to tell God what to do or when to do it.

Rather they are asking Him the question because they have a holy desire to see Satan and Antichrist destroyed, iniquity defeated, the wicked judged, and Jesus Christ reigning in glory on the earth.

The petition they make is an intense one. KRAZO (cried out) is a strong word that emphasizes an urgent need and denotes strong emotions.

In this verse, they are passionately calling out for God to bring His judgment upon the unbelieving world.

But notice that they possess a high view of God and acknowledge His character as they sought His judgment to be carried out.

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In fact there are four aspects of God’s character acknowledged in this petition.

a. They acknowledge that God is Omnipotent.

These slain souls acknowledge God’s omnipotence in how they address God. They cried out, “How long, O Lord...”

This is not the typical New Testament term translated Lord. Rather it is a stronger term, the Greek is [DESPOTES], which means, “master” or “ruler.”

It is where we get the English term, “despot.” A despot is a ruler who holds absolute power.

Now in our modern times this holds a negative connotation, but the use of it here is an acknowledgement of God’s absolute power.

Addressing God with this term suggests that these slain saints were acknowledging God’s absolute authority; His Sovereignty; His Omnipotence, just as He is acknowledged in Revelation 1:8 as the Almighty!

Truly God is powerful and possesses absolute power and authority and we should acknowledge Him as so, just as these slain souls do here in Revelation 6.

b. They also acknowledge that God is holy.

These slain saints make a direct statement acknowledging the fact that the Lord is holy.

The term “holy” in its primitive form means, “to be set apart, separated, elevated, or lofty.”

A. W. Tozer says, “Holy is the way God is. To be holy He does not conform to a standard. He is that standard. He is absolutely holy with an infinite, incomprehensible fullness of purity that is incapable of being other than it is. Because He is holy, all His attributes are holy; that is whatever we think of belonging to God must be thought of as holy.”

With the basic meaning of holiness being, “set apart” or the idea of separation, a couple of features must be embraced in regards to the holiness of God.

(1) It has a transcendent emphasis, indicating that He is absolutely distinct from all His creatures and is exalted above them in infinite majesty.

(2) It also has an ethical emphasis, indicating that He is separate from moral evil or sin. In other words God is pure and righteous.

We can learn a great deal about God’s holiness in the Bible. What can we learn about the holiness of God as highlighted in the Scripture?

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- 1-Leviticus 11:44-45 emphasizes that God’s character is holy.
- 2-Psalm 47:8 emphasizes that God’s rule is holy.
- 3-Psalm 11:4 emphasizes that God’s temple is holy.
- 4-1 Peter 1:15 emphasizes that God’s people were to be holy.

1 Peter 1:15 says, “but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior...”

As believers in Christ we should strive to be like God. We should strive to be holy. We should strive to be set apart from sin, not just in one area of our lives, but in every area.

This is not easy! We are trapped in bodies of flesh and live in a sinful world. Yet, we are to strive to be holy in all of our behavior just as God is holy in His character.

c. They also acknowledge that God is true.

The Greek term true [ALETHINOS] denotes that which is genuine, authentic, and real.

In the midst of falsehood, perversion, and error that fill the world, the Lord is true. He is genuine authentic and real.

This idea of the Lord being holy and true harkens back to Revelation 3:7, which speaks of Christ being holy and true.

Just as the Apostle John proclaims in 1 John 5:20, “*And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.*”

Christ is no counterfeit. He is perfect in unblemished truth.

In fact this is what he claims in John 14:6 when He says, “I am the way and the **truth** and the life.”

Do you believe this? I often wonder if we truly believe this with all of our hearts.

If we truly believed that Jesus Christ is true/the truth, then it should have a greater impact on our daily lives.

We would worship God in truth as John 4:24 instructs.

We would rejoice in truth as 1 Corinthians 13:6 emphasizes.

We would speak to one another in truth as Ephesians 4:25 urges.

We would meditate or think upon the truth as Philippians 4:8 encourages.

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If we were truly seeking to follow the example of Christ as He who is true, then truth would permeate our lives.

They not only acknowledge that God is omnipotent, holy and true, but...

d. They also acknowledge that God is patient.

They do not do so by direct statement, rather it is implied.

They acknowledge God's patience in their petition, when they say, "***How long...will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood...***"

The term translated ***refrain*** is literally the Greek term for "no" or "not." Thus the question is literally, "How long...will you not judge and avenge our blood?"

The implication is that God is patient in bringing judgment upon those who dwell on the earth.

It almost carries the nuance of Peter's statement in 2 Peter 3:9 in which he says, "***The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.***"

God is truly characterized by patience. He will enact His judgment upon the unbelieving world, but in His own time, according to His own plan and purposes, accomplishing His will.

What we can take home from this is that just as God is patient, thus we are to exhibit patience in our own lives; it is a fruit of the Spirit to be born out in the believer's life according to Galatians 5:22.

God is all-powerful, holy, true and patient and as such we can trust that He will accomplish His predetermined plan according to His timetable and not ours.

3. Third, notice the Promise that is rendered (Revelation 6:11).

John continues in verse 11, "***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, would be completed also.***"

Two elements make up God's response to His martyred saints. What are the two elements of God's response?

a. First, they were given a robe.

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The robe is described as a white robe. The term speaks of a long brilliant white robe that flows to the feet.

It is unclear whether these were actual robes or not, since what is depicted in this vision takes place before the resurrection of the tribulation saints, which occurs at Christ's Second Coming to establish His millennial reign on earth recorded in Revelation 19 and 20.

It is interesting that in Revelation 3:5, this same type of robe is promised to the overcomers in the church at Sardis.

These robes are a gift; a reward of grace symbolizing God's gift of eternal righteousness. In other words, the robe symbolized the fact that they had eternal life through faith in Christ.

But, these slain saints were not just given a gift, but they were also given some instruction.

b. Second, they were told to rest.

John records in verse 11, "***and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer...***"

This is not a rebuke for impatience, since impatience is a sin and those who are in heaven do not sin.

Rather it is an invitation to stop the cry for vengeance and to continue to enjoy the bliss of heavenly rest until God's time for actual vengeance arrives.

The phrase, "***for a little while longer***" indicates that the time will not be long delayed.

Why is there a delay? The culmination of God's wrath is waiting "***until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.***"

This instruction to the souls under the altar gives them reassurance that God will eventually avenge their blood, but the time for the culmination of that vengeance has not yet arrived.

One feature that must transpire beforehand is the increase of their number through additional martyrdoms.

Those who dwell on the earth under the dawning leadership of the beast from the sea will take an even greater toll of human lives before Christ intervenes through His personal arrival back on earth.

Until then the already martyred saints are told to rest and enjoy their state of blessedness and rest.

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CONCLUSION:

After the death of Jim Elliot, Nate Saint and the other three missionaries, Jim's wife, Elisabeth and other missionaries continued the work with the Auca tribe.

In fact the son of Nate Saint, Steve Saint continues to work with the Waodani people and often travels around the world preaching the Gospel along with one of the Waodani natives who attacked the missionaries.

Truly amazing, although the missionaries were martyred for their faith, the natives from the tribe eventually believed and now carry the Gospel of Christ to the world.

One of the most famous quotes of Jim Elliot ended up describing his life and mission. He said, **“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”**

Clearly, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint and the other missionaries gave what they could not keep (their physical lives upon this earth) to gain what they could not lose (future reward in heaven).

Like these missionaries and the slain souls of Revelation 6, I pray that we are willing to boldly proclaim the truth of God's Word regardless of the consequences that we might face and in so doing that God will be glorified.