

Fifth Seal

Revelation 6: 9-11



9 And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long,

O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

11 And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

The one opening the seals is the Lamb. In the vision John saw, it was the Lamb on the throne, opening the seals on the scroll. It was the Lord Jesus, the Risen Lord, who was overseeing worldwide events, and ensuring the exact fulfillment of prophecy, proving to all those Believers that He was Risen, and cared for them, and was watching over his flock.

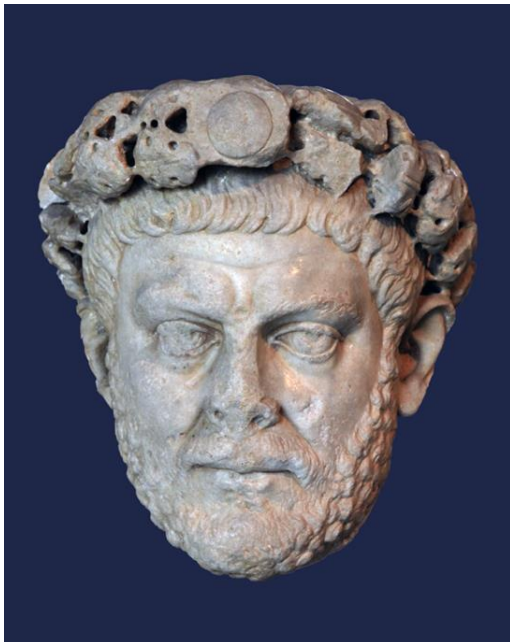
With all of the first four seals being opened, one of the four Living Ones, asked John to “Come and see”. This refers to the existence of a

recognisable (by the Roman Empire and general public) and interconnected, Christian, One Body, the Ecclesia, which had not yet been so corrupted and to be subsumed or submerged in apostasy, and was still fighting against both the effects of persecution and holding off against heresy.

But with the opening of the Fifth seal, we hear no such invitation, the Living Ones had been corrupted. The Living Ones no longer had a political voice, they had been silenced. Please note this point, as it will be returned to shortly.*

We recall how the time of the fourth seal was symbolised with a pale horse. Pale in Greek is *chloros* or yellowish green, a sickly colour, and the rider was called Death. That particular period of the Roman Empire AD 253 – 303 was marked by frightening violence, where 24 emperors and 15 claiming to be emperors were all murdered, killed and assassinated within just fifty years!

But what followed was better for the Roman empire but worse for the followers of Jesus Christ, the Christians a lot worse!



The Roman Empire stabilised finally under the rule of one called Diocletian. Here is a stone bust of his head, shown wearing a coronal wreath, which represented victory. He showed great skill and innovation in managing the Empire, bringing it back into economic stability. He divided the empire into two, - east and west and then again, so that it was ruled by

tetrarchs (rulers of four), with him as the main ruler. He secured the empire's borders, and led various campaigns against threats to his power, such as Persia and in the Balkans and brought about a semblance of peace. One quarter of the empire was ruled over by Galerius who was his son in law. He saw political advantage in persecuting



any who were not faithful to the Roman pagan pantheon, and the entire Roman army was ordered to perform the required sacrifices or face discharge. Diocletian began to get annoyed with those who did not follow Roman tradition. Because of some public disputes with another religious group called the Manicheans (followers of Mani), Diocletian wound up by his son in law, and his own pride ordered them all to be executed, and their leaders to go work in the quarries.

In AD 302, Diocletian travelled to Antioch and there he ordered that the deacon Romanus of Caesarea have his tongue removed for defying the order of the courts and interrupting official sacrifices. This was a sign meant to symbolise the silencing of the political voice of Christians – we remind you of the earlier point *.

Diocletian increasingly became absolutist, and described himself as an autocrat. In 303 he published an Edict against the Christians, which ordered the destruction of Christian scriptures and places of worship across the empire, and prohibited Christians from assembling for worship. Again – we can see the huge efforts which were made to eradicate Christianity, so that it was barely recognisable as a movement. After this Edict was issued, a fire

destroyed part of the Imperial Palace. This fire was blamed onto the Christians, and one was arrested, he was stripped, raised high, and scourged. Salt and vinegar were poured in his wounds, and he was slowly boiled over an open flame.

This level of cruelty became the signature of Diocletian as he rapidly increased the persecution of all Christians (which by now were about 10% of the population) within the empire, to a level never experienced before. Being burnt alive became a common method of executing Christians in the East, in Syria and Turkey, ordinary criminals were released from prison to make way for the great number of deacons, priests and bishops that were arrested for not burning their scriptures or denouncing their faith.

Many Christians went into hiding and in Rome for example worshipped in the catacombs, - under ground burial chambers. It was about this time that the use of the sign of the fish was used as a way of secretly determining whether someone else was a Christian or not. The word ichthys (ἰχθύς) is the Greek word for "fish." Early Christians created an acrostic, or a word formed from the first letters of a phrase, using the Greek letters for the word ichthys:

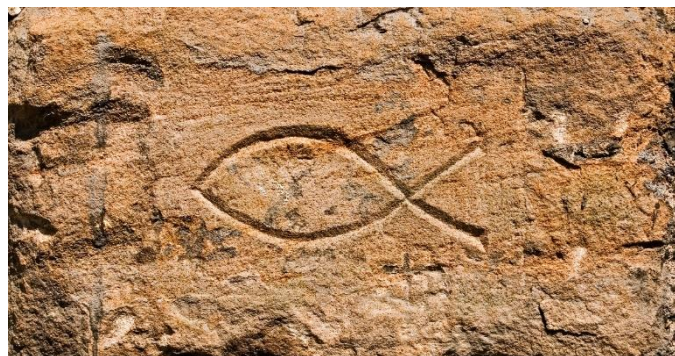
I – Iesous (Jesus)

CH – Christos (Christ)

TH – Theou (of God)

Y – Yios (Son)

S – Soter (Savior)

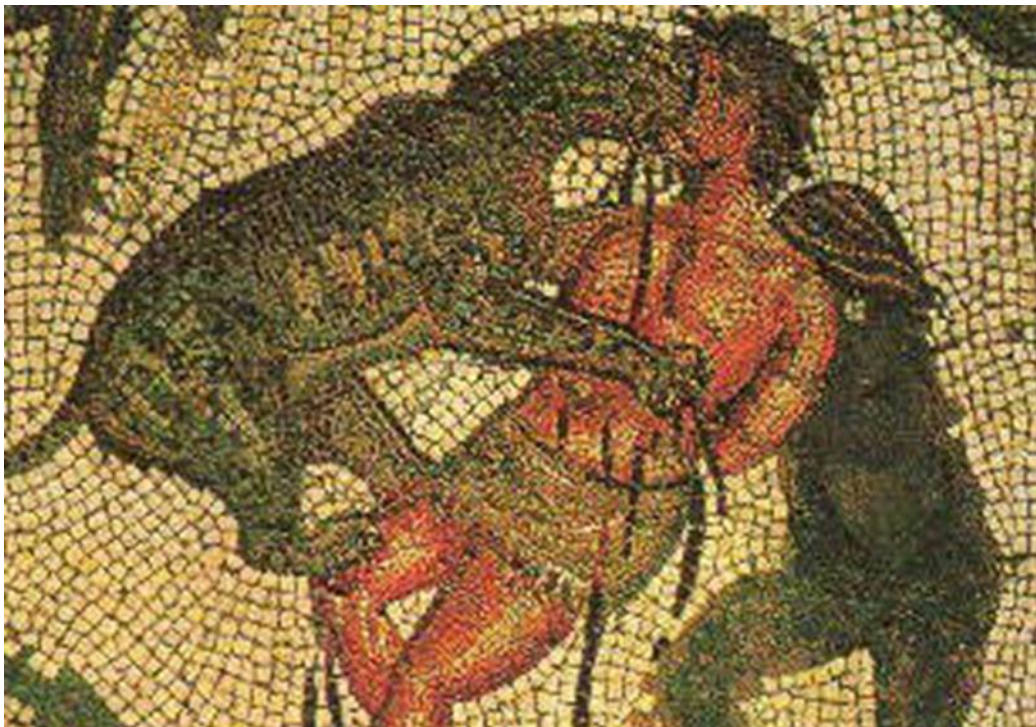


This spelled out the core belief: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior".



Many Christians who refused to recant their faith were arrested, and used in the public stadiums as entertainment by being devoured alive by lions and other wild animals.

Here this horrible event is depicted in Roman mosaics, - replicated by blood thirsty Roman citizens who seemed to enjoy such spectacles.





This is the historical setting of this period described in the Revelation here in this chapter 6 as the fifth seal.

No longer with a voice, the Christian movement is scattered and severely tested. Those who were not sincere, or severely frightened quickly recanted and denounced their faith, others were not true anyway, others were heretics and apostates and corrupting the Christian movement. The fact that it had become so important politically within the empire and attracted this negative attention, shows that apostasy had already crept in to a great extent.

Thus true believers suffered on many accounts – persecution, and persecution because of the foolish behaviour of apostates who falsely called themselves Christians, but were liars and of the synagogue of Satan. Further, they suffered, by being falsely labelled and accused, - just as their founder had – Jesus Christ.

In his revelation to John, Jesus foresaw, and predicted this terrible suffering his flock would endure, and he describes it in such compassionate and symbolic language: John was shown:

I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

What Altar did John see? What did that piece of the vision mean? What are these souls, and why under the altar? And can souls speak?

An altar was used by God in the law of Moses to teach the nation of Israel of the need for sacrifice, and not any old offering, but one which was dedicated, holy and pure. The altar as a receptacle or means for that sacrifice, likewise, had to be made in a very special way, otherwise, the sacrifice would not be acceptable. Ultimately none of these offerings or Altars did anything for the spiritual well-being, they were just shadows, pointing forward to the ultimate sacrifice. Jesus Christ was that Altar, the vessel fashioned by God, wherein took place the greatest sacrifice of all, how he gave his whole life, never giving in to sin, but using the fire, the judgement of the word of God to overcome and purge the flesh. The writer to the Hebrews mentions this Altar: Hebrews 13:10 *We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.*

Jesus Christ the righteous is The Altar. Those who give their lives to him in baptism, become part of that Altar, they too are using the fire of the word to purge their bodies. When finally that struggle ends, and the servant of Christ dies, he dies in Christ, and he is therefore under the Altar, returned to ashes, to dust, but they are most holy - Psalm 116:15: *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.* 1 Peter 1:5: *Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

It may be asked: "But if they are dead in Christ, How can their souls speak then as the Revelation depicts. Does not scripture say that the soul that sins it shall die, and seeing all have sinned and fallen short

of the Kingdom of God, how can these souls who have died speak?" It is a good question.

These are the words that John hears them cry in the vision:

10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

Moreover the next verse describes these souls being given white robes to wear! Maybe this is where people get funny ideas of wearing white robes in heaven from.

11 And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

Recalling that the Revelation is a book of sign, we are also aware that the word soul in the Bible in Hebrew can also be used for LIFE.

So John saw the lives of the persecuted who had died in the Lord. They had died for Jesus and for his sake, and for the Truth. Their deaths cried out for retribution! Do we not recall the first martyr for Jesus? Abel: Genesis 4:10: *And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood cries unto me from the ground.*

The prayer was answered and is answered, as the empires, rulers, and kingdoms of men, do not last long, but also soon pass off the scene, and moulder away to dust, unloved, forgotten, glory and pomp serving nothing but the scraping of an archaeologist's trowel. By contrast the lives of those who die in Christ, are laid up in heaven in the book of life, to be raised again at the last day, at the last trump, to be resurrected to immortal glory.

White robes have been given to them in death, in that they died in Christ, and therefore covered by his life, his life of righteousness clothed them, so that they will again live in Christ. Galatians 2:20

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Brother Terry