On Martyrs and Madness
Revelation 6:9-17

The scene is heaven; John is witness to the Lamb, Jesus, taking a seven sealed scroll from the right hand of God the Father who is seated on His throne; there is rejoicing in heaven as Jesus alone is worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals.

As the scroll is rolled open, breaking seal after seal, the events that must take place are revealed; these events describe what will happen on earth during the great Tribulation following the rapture of the Church; the first four seals describe the activities of the Antichrist as he is the rider on the four horses of the apocalypse.

When the Lamb broke the first seal there came forth a white horse and he who sat upon it went out conquering and to conquer; we named the horse Counterfeit for its rider is a counterfeit Christ and he brings to the world a counterfeit peace; he comes to conquer but not by military might; though he has a bow in his hand there are no arrows; he conquers by deception and intrigue; he comes as a peace negotiator between Israel and the Muslim Arab world; he is ultimately successful in ushering in a temporary worldwide peace.

When the Lamb broke the second seal there came forth a fiery red horse; we named that horse Conflict, for he who sat upon it takes had a great sword in his hand; he came to take away peace from the earth; following a time when people will be saying, “Peace and safety,” war will break out and people will betray one another and will hate one another.

When the Lamb broke open the third seal there came forth a black horse and he who sat upon it had a pair of scales in his hand; we named that horse Commerce for a great famine will follow the war as the Antichrist controls the price of food; he has taken over the world’s economy and people will only be
able to buy or sell if they have the mark of the beast; this mark is given only to those who worship the Antichrist and declare him to be god.

When the Lamb broke open the fourth seal there came forth a pale horse; we named that horse Corpse, for he who sat upon it was Death; power was given to him to kill one fourth of the earth by sword, hunger, pestilence, and wild beasts.

The picture is not a pretty one! But Jesus warned us that a time of great Tribulation would come upon the earth with the rise of the Antichrist; he will first show up by deceiving the world with a false peace, followed by war, then by famine as he will control the world’s economy, and finally by death as one fourth of the world’s population will die.

This leads to the opening of the fifth seal.

The Martyrs in Heaven (6:9-11)

“When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held” (6:9).

The description of the martyrs...

1. As to what they look like... “I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain...” (6:9b); In heaven are the souls or disembodied spirits of those who had been martyred under the rule of the Antichrist during the great Tribulation; they are referred to as souls, or spirit beings for they have not yet been given their resurrection bodies.

This is true of all the saints who die in the Lord and go to heaven; death is the separation of the spirit from the body (James 2:26); upon death, the spirit which is the real person, goes to be with the Lord, while the physical body decomposes in the grave; remember, Paul said, “To be absent from the body is to be home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

What is interesting here is that when the Church is raptured, the spirit of the believer comes with Christ and the body that was in the grave is miraculously put together and is reunited with the spirit in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18); however, the bodies of Old Testament saints as
well as those martyred for Christ during the Tribulation will not receive their physical bodies until Christ comes to earth at the end of the Tribulation; what we are saying is, there is one bodily resurrection for the dead in Christ at the time of the rapture and a second bodily resurrection for the Old Testament saints and Tribulation saints at His second coming to the earth (Daniel 12:1-3); in heaven today are all believers from the Old Testament days until now, but they dwell there as disembodied spirits—they undoubtedly have a recognizable appearance, but they are not living in their physical body; once the rapture occurs, the saints will get their resurrected bodies, while others will have to wait for their resurrection that will takes place when Christ returns to set up His Millennial kingdom.

2. As to where they are found... “I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain...” (6:9b); they are “under the altar”; in the Jewish temple there were two altars: the altar of burnt offerings and the altar of incense; the altar of burnt offerings was the altar of sacrifice and once an animal was sacrificed the blood of that animal was smeared on the horns of the altar and poured on the bottom of the altar (Exodus 29:12; Leviticus 4:4, 17, 18, 25, 30); the other altar was the altar of incense where wreaths of sweet smelling smoke from burning incense would ascend upward symbolizing the prayers of the people (Exodus 40:5; Psalm 141:2).

Which altar were they under the text does not say; they were martyred as a type of sacrifice to the Lord so you can imagine them under the altar of burnt offerings; yet, we will find them praying and asking God to put a stop to the carnage and bring vengeance on those who are martyring the saints so you can imagine them under the altar of incense; that to me makes the most sense.

3. As to why they were killed... “...those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held” (6:9c); they were slain for their conviction, “for the word of God” and for their confession, “for the testimony which they held.”

During the Tribulation the persecution of believers will be official government policy under the Antichrist; the courts, the governors, the religious institutions will all be involved; in Revelation 17:6 we read that the false harlot church will become drunk with the blood of martyrs; we
are seeing the beginning of this today with Muslims beheading thousands of Christians in Middle Eastern nations; we can see the treatment of Christians in China who have to worship underground to protect themselves from the government; while it has not reached the point of martyrdom for Christians in the United States, there is a growing hatred toward believers that comes from an academia that supports a socialistic, free-thinking society that views Christianity as oppressive with its views on marriage, homosexuality, and gender neutrality; the thought of a God who would die on a cross for our sins when to secularists, sin and universal evil do not exist, is likewise laughable to them.

4. As to who wins these Tribulation martyrs to Christ... Remember the Church has been raptured and all those left behind never came to Christ or never had a personal relationship with Him; yet during the Tribulation period there will be a great evangelistic endeavor; it begins when two witnesses, most likely Moses and Elijah come to earth and will prophecy for 1,260 days, or the first 3½ years of the Tribulation; at the middle of the Tribulation they are killed and left to lie in the streets of Jerusalem for 3½ days before they ascend into heaven (Revelation 11:3-13); they could have a part in winning 144,000 Jewish evangelists to Christ—12,000 from each of the 12 tribes; they will be sealed with the seal of God so no man can kill them until their ministry is finished; they will win to Christ a “great multitude which no one could number, of all the nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and the Lamb... these are the ones who come out of the great tribulation...” (Revelation 7:4, 9, 14); it appears that most everyone who accepts Christ during this time will be martyred or certainly persecuted in inhumane ways.

The declaration about the martyrs...

1. In terms of their cry... “And they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’” (6:10); this is a prayer for God to bring immediate judgment on those who are shedding the blood of believers and to avenge the blood of the martyrs; this prayer is all about vengeance; we must not forget that our God is a vengeful God; He says of Himself in Deuteronomy 32:35, “Vengeance is Mine, and retribution”;
twice more in the same chapter He says, “I will render vengeance on My enemies” (32:41, 43).

People today want to recast God in the form that pleases them, and in doing so they eliminate any thought of God being a vengeful God; in Psalm 94:1 the psalmist characterizes God as vengeful, “O LORD God, to whom vengeance belongs—O God, to whom vengeance belongs, shine forth.”

As Christians we are called not to be individually vengeful toward our adversaries; rather we are to love them, bless them, and pray for them, (Matthew 5:44); we are to show compassion toward them in their time of need (Proverbs 25:21; Romans 12:20); we are to demonstrate the love of God toward them even as God demonstrated His love toward us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:6-8); only God has the right to be vengeful; Paul wrote to the Romans, “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30).

God alone has the right to be vengeful and the prayer of the martyrs is, “How long until you judge and avenge our blood”; it appears that the martyrs know how they died and that this bloody persecution of believers was still going on; perhaps there is some truth to the notion that those in heaven know what is going here on earth; we have all heard people say of someone celebrating some great occasion, “Grandpa and grandma are smiling in heaven as they are looking down on you.”

There is another truth that these martyrs teach us; their prayers in heaven dispel the doctrine of soul sleeping; these martyrs are very conscious as they pray; the Seventh Day Adventists are among those who deny immediate entrance into heaven upon one’s death; they maintain the soul goes to sleep until the resurrection; yet Paul reminds us, “To be absent from the body is to be home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8); Jesus reminds us that upon the death of the righteous, the angels come and carry their spirit into Paradise (Luke 18:22)

2. In terms of their clothing... “Then a white robe was given to each of them...” (6:11a); white stands for purity, righteousness and victory; these robes of white give assurance that though they suffered greatly
for Christ—even to the shedding of blood in their deaths, they would not have to face such persecution again, for in Christ they stand pure and holy before a holy God and are forever victorious.

3. *In terms of their concern*... “...and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed” (6:11b); there prayer was answered, vengeance is coming, but not yet; evidently there is a certain number of believers in the tribulation who have to die before God will act; it reminds me of what Paul said concerning the salvation of the Jews, “that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, and so all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:25-16); that is, revival will come to Israel after a certain number of Gentiles are saved; so God’s vengeance on those killing the believers in the tribulation will happen only after a certain number are martyred; as we move through this book there are more yet to die for Christ (11:7; 12:11; 14:13; 20:4-5).

The Madness on Earth (6:12-17)

*The destructiveness of fear...* The Lamb now opens the sixth seal and there is madness everywhere; madness in the sense that people are going out of their mind because of fear—fear of the wrath of God; this seal is all about fear; this fear is so powerful that it results in the world’s largest prayer meeting; the problem is they don’t pray to God, they pray to the mountains and the rocks to fall upon them and hide them from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; this is a prayer for suicide; a prayer for destruction.

We know that fear is normal and can actually be beneficial at times; fear can be a means of self preservation and the protection of others; there are normal fears like the fear of disease, the fear of injury, the fear of the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of money, the loss of life; most people can handle these fears in an adequate way.

On the other hand, fear can be so overpowering that it makes people act in ways that seem so against their nature; it can create all kinds of responses from cowardice to heroism, from strength to weakness, from aggression to passivity, from clarity to confusion, from rational thinking to total insanity.
Several years ago, Ann Landers put together a list of people’s most irrational fears; among the list was the fear of falling into the toilet, the fear of certain colors, the fear of being buried alive, the fear of being stared at, the fear of calling someone by their given name; I remember counseling with a person who was fearful of the outside and panicked at the thought of leaving her house.

There is a fear coming on mankind that will make many act in ways they never thought before—a fear that will literally drive them mad; it is the fear of the Lord; Jesus spoke of a day when “men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth for the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Luke 21:26); the word translated “failing” (apopsucho) means “to die”; there will be such fear that people will be scared to death; they will die from sheer terror because they will realize they have fallen into the hands of the living God; the writer of Hebrews says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

The descriptions of the catastrophes coming on the earth... “I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold there was a great earthquake, the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place” (6:12-14).

1. A great earthquake... We all fear earthquakes; we live in earthquake country and we have been told for years the great quake is coming; we must never forget that God is the one who shakes the earth; He shook it at Sinai when He gave the Law (Exodus 19:18); He shook it when Elijah called on Him (1 Kings 19:11-12); He shook it when Jesus was hanging on the cross (Matthew 27:51); He shook it to release Paul and Silas from jail (Acts 16:26); He shakes it from time to time for His own purposes; but during the tribulation there will be earthquakes so great that people will literally be scared to death.

2. The sun becomes black as sackcloth and the moon turns a blood red... Sackcloth is what people wore to funerals; it was a rough garment you wore when you wanted to mourn; the sun blackens and the moon turns red; Dr. Henry Morris, a creation-scientist offers this explanation: “The vast network of unstable earthquake belts around the world begin to slip and fracture on a global basis and a giant earthquake ensues. This
is accompanied by tremendous volcanic eruptions, spewing vast quantities of dust and steam and gases into the upper atmosphere. It is probably these that will cause the sun to be darkened and the moon to appear blood red."

3. *The stars of the heavens fall to the earth...* The word for “star” (*asteras*) is where we get the word “asteroid”; perhaps the best explanation is the earth is going to be showered with a meteors; scientists have speculated for years the unbelievable destruction that would be caused if massive meteors hit the earth; the analogy of these meteors hitting the earth is like a fig tree unloading its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind; if a tree is covered with figs they could all come down in mass; so with these meteors—masses of them striking the earth all at once; where would you hide from that kind of heavenly bombardment?

4. *The sky recedes as a scroll...* When scrolls get old, having been rolled open and rolled up hundreds of times, then sit for years, they will dry out and begin to crack in the middle; then they break apart and roll up into two separates scrolls; so the sky will rip apart like that old scroll that cracks and breaks apart; the sky is literally ripped down the middle; stars are careening all over the place; the whole universe is shaking; the sun is darkened, the moon has turned blood red, the earth is being blasted by meteorites falling out of the sky; what a frightening scene; no wonder people have gone mad and are scared to death.

5. *Every mountain and island is moved out of its place...* Dr. Morris writes, “The earth’s crust highly unstable since the great Flood will be so disturbed by the impacting asteroids, the volcanic explosions, the earthquakes, that great segments of it will actually begin to slip and slide over the earth’s deep plastic mantle... Geophysicists for many years have been fascinated with the idea of continental drift... they speak of the earth’s shifting crust. Some such phenomenon may actually be triggered under the judgment of the sixth seal, dwarfing the damage of all the mighty earthquakes of the past.”

I have a word here for environmentalists and those who want to “Save Mother Earth”; if you think the earth is messed up now, wait till God gets through with it; the earth is a disposable planet and it was made disposable by sin; He made it and He will destroy it; Peter tells us the heavens and earth will pass away with a great noise, and the elements
will melt with fervent heat (2 Peter 3:10); knowing this writes Peter, “what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness” (3:11); instead of trying to save a disposable planet, we ought to concern ourselves with our own salvation and with holy conduct and godliness.

The dread of those on earth... “And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’” (6:15-17).

1. The range of fear... The whole world is going to be involved in the fear; it begins with the elite of the world—the kings, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men; then the common people are mentioned—the slaves and the free man; the catastrophes that will rein on the earth as God’s judgments will affect everyone; everyone will see it, feel it, and experience it.

2. The reaction to the fear... The text says they hid themselves in the rocks and the mountains; they did not repent of sin; they had heard the gospel and even in the midst of all that is taking place, they choose to ignore the gospel.

Why wouldn’t they repent? They have followed the path of Satan and are deceived; they identified with the Antichrist and believed a delusion; Paul wrote, “God will send on them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who didn’t believe the truth but took pleasure in wickedness” (2 Thessalonians 2:11).

Why would God harden their hearts so they cannot believe? God is omniscient; He knows people’s hearts; He knows that their only reason for repentance would be because they got caught in their sins, not because their repentance is sincere; so God hardens their hearts so they cannot even offer an insincere repentance.

3. The request out of fear... Notice to whom they pray; they cry out to the rocks and mountains, “Fall on us and hide from the face of Him who sits
on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!” They know about God and the wrath of His Son, but instead of asking them for help, they pray to Mother Nature; they know that the Lamb is angry and “the great day of their wrath has come”; it is here, the day of the Lord, and then the question, “Who is able to stand?” (6:17).

4. The retribution from God... What is the answer? “Who is able to stand?” No one! In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians he wrote, “Destruction will come and they will not escape” (1 Thessalonians 5:3); the prophet Nahum wrote of God’s wrath, “Who can stand before His indignation? And who can endure the fierceness of His anger? His fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by Him” (Nahum 1:6).

As we have seen and will yet see there will be those who truly repent—so many in fact that they cannot be numbered; yet, there are those who know the gospel who go on sinning willfully after knowing the truth; the writer of Hebrews remind us, “If we go on sinning willfully, after receiving a knowledge of the truth, there is no longer a sacrifice for sin” (Hebrews 10:26); Christ did not die so we could live as we please; He died that we might live for Him; those who refuse to do so will face “a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries” (Hebrews 10:27).

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Comparing Revelation 6 with Matthew 24

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