

The first eight verses of this chapter depict the opening of the first four seals at the decree from the throne of God and the suffering that followed which seems to be the result of wars. This parallels Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:6,7 ⁶ *And you will hear of wars rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.* ⁷ *For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.* Note that the end is not yet. The fifth seal is the martyrs asking how long God will withhold judgment on the wickedness that took their righteous lives. The answer comes in seals six and seven. Since these martyrs are in heaven, they clearly see the heinousness of murdering the saints. **They realize justice is a righteous virtue.** It is a continuation of the theme of staying true to the example of Christ that we saw in the letters to the churches, and of the righteous judgments decreed upon rebellion against God. This is not just seeking vengeance; it is a cry for evil to reap the justice it deserves. We all enjoy a movie where the villain finally gets what he deserves. This is not merely getting even, such as an eye for an eye, but seeing that right prevails and evil is punished.

As fallen humans **we want justice for others but grace for ourselves.** A recent secular trend is to forgive the criminal and put him back on the street because, they say, "after all, he or she is a victim as well." It is a way to justify sin by blaming our actions on others. It sounds like grace, yet the 70% of criminals who are released are back in prison within five years. That means letting them out early or not incarcerating them simply means more victims. We need a way to determine who has truly changed, and we will see that in the next chapter. Consider the heart hardened by sin. Apostle Paul was an exception but one that gives hope for the most hardened (1 Timothy 1:15ⁱ). These judgments will fall on those whom God knows will never accept His love and grace.

Verses 9-11 are written in the form of a hymn. Usually, the hymns in Revelation are a continuation of the thoughts before (verses 1-8), which in this case are the first four seals. Further adding to the connection are the words kill and slay from the first section repeated in this last part of the chapter.

We see again the parallel to the Olivet Discourse Matthew 24:9,10 ⁹ *"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake."* ¹⁰ *And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.* Though we will see a spiritual protection from God's wrath, the saints are not protected from the physical wrath of man.

⁹ *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 witness they had borne.* Revelation 6:9 The first readers would have seen these people as the martyrs from Domitian's persecution. Jesus told the Smyrna church to be faithful unto death. In these verses they are seeing the honor given to those who were. Their testimony (*logos*) is that Jesus is Lord. That implies Caesar is not. They clung to the Word and would not compromise. For that they would be thrown to wild beasts in the arena, boiled in oil, set ablaze, or killed with a sword. Antipas was mentioned in one of the letters and more are named by historians. More martyrs are added every day. Many more will be added when the antichrist makes war on the saints. These are all those who were faithful unto death and are under the altar.

The altar is more likely the altar of incense than the altar of sacrifice for sins. They were living sacrifices acceptable to God (Romans 12:1ⁱⁱ), but not sacrifices for sin. The altar

of incense was a picture of prayer (Psalm 141:2ⁱⁱⁱ), and that is what they are doing in this passage. That altar in the shadow on earth was before the throne of God, the Ark of the Covenant. The substance of that shadow is in the heavenly realm before the throne we read about in chapters 4 and 5 (Hebrews 8:5^{iv}). The martyrs find divine covering under the altar like chicks are safely tucked under the mother hen's wings.

In this scene, the martyrs ask how long until God will judge and avenge their blood. Some people would argue that this is not Christlike. The psalmists often asked how long until wickedness was judged (Psalm 35:17^v; 74:10^{vi}; 94:3^{vii}). God is holy and true, therefore evil must be judged (Psalm 79:10^{viii}). Those abused Christians will be avenged. Holiness demands it. These martyrs are simply asking how long God's patience will go on. That points more to God's patience and His desire that none should perish (2 Peter 3:9^{ix}). Remember that Abel's blood cries out from the ground (Genesis 4:10^x; Hebrews 11:4^{xi}). Justice is only right (Deuteronomy 32:4^{xii}).

An argument can be made that these souls are not just the ones who were killed by Rome or those throughout time who were murdered because of their faith, but all those who die in faith. All disciples take up their cross and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24^{xiii}). He told us to find life in giving up our lives (Matthew 10:39^{xiv}). The letter to the Romans does refer to believers as sheep for the slaughter (Romans 8:36^{xv}). Chapter 20:4^{xvi} speaks of those who were beheaded for their witness in contrast to the rest of the dead who were unbelievers in 20:5,6^{xvii}. This seems to indicate that the use of the word martyrs, which is also the word translated as witnesses, includes all who die in faith and not only those who are killed because of their faith.

Pastor James Hamilton wrote, *We must come to the point where what matters most to us is faithfulness to God. Faithfulness to the word of God and the gospel must be more important to us than pleasure, more important to us than leisure, and more important than life itself. We must value faithfulness to God and his word more than we value the ability to go on living our peaceful, happy lives. That is what it means to be "faithful unto death."*^{xviii} That quote says it all. It does not mean that God has not given us things to richly enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17^{xix}), but that He must be first in everything in life. It means that faithfulness to Him must be our priority. Let me speak bluntly. *If other things are more important to you, there is a good chance He is not the Lord of your life.* Let that sink in. There is nothing more important. What do you desire? That is where your heart is (Matthew 5:21^{xx}). If it is not to know Him and let Him lead you, then repent and receive His forgiveness! He died for you. This is a matter of eternal life and death. It determines which side you have chosen in this cosmic battle of good versus evil. You will be on the side of the murderers or on the side of the witnesses who were in many cases slain only because they were guilty of loving God and their fellow man (Matthew 22:37-40^{xxi}).

¹⁰ *They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"* Revelation 6:10 Why are they crying out for justice? Because the Lord is holy and true. Injustice cannot be allowed to go on forever. God declared that vengeance belongs to Him. He promises to repay (Romans 12:19^{xxii}). Many of these souls under the altar died horrible deaths because they spoke the truth in love to a dying world. Some were burned alive on a stake while witnessing with their last breath. A God who would let such evil go unpunished would not be holy. Their voice is the culmination of all those who died from Able to those the antichrist will kill for being faithful to God. Cain's murder of Abel was the first of a pattern

that would go through millennia, the righteous unjustly slain simply because they placed their faith in God and put Him first in their lives. These souls under the altar are joining the cry of Abel's spilt blood (Hebrews 11:4^{xxiii}).

The question, "how long," is used in the Old Testament of inquiring when God will judge those who persecute the righteous and vindicate the oppressed. *The saints' cry "how long?" is also inspired by Zech. 1:12^{xxiv}. There the same question, "how long?" is asked after the four groups of horses have patrolled the earth and reported that the nations that had persecuted Israel were enjoying peace. God then responds by proclaiming that he will remove this peace and judge those nations (Zech. 1:13–16^{xxv}), and the same horses become the agents of this judgment (Zech. 6:1–8)^{xxvi}*

¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. Revelation 6:11 The people who died in faith have overcome and are given a symbol of their purity which is their white robes. Those robes may also represent victory. While it appears the world was victorious, the martyrs are the ones who are standing. Just as with our Savior, God tends to snatch victory out of the jaws of defeat. He frustrates our enemy at every turn. Many of the martyrs in history went joyfully to their death knowing with the certainty of faith what awaited them. **Our attitude toward our circumstances reveals where our faith lies.**

It was not God's time to avenge their blood, for more were destined for martyrdom. Goodspeed says that the verb wait may mean "be quiet a little while longer."

"Be quiet until more die," may sound to a worldly person like God is uncaring. But to die for the Lord means we are honored to give our life for Him as He gave His for us. They would escape the coming wars and the burden of living into old age under an oppressive regime. It also adds to the sense of God's patience to wait until the last of these persecutors would turn and believe after witnessing the conviction of people who die in faith. God's plan cannot be hurried or delayed. He knows who the last convert will be. This parallels Jesus' prediction that the gospel being proclaimed in all the nations and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14^{xxvii}).

In modern times we read of conversions that were prompted by the way Christians faced death. When the last Christian is killed for his or her faith, it will be time to pour out God's wrath on all who reject Him as Lord and instead choose unrighteousness, thinking of themselves as gods. Their mantra is, "Not your will but mine be done!" Leon Morris writes, *But the final destruction of evil is certain. It is not a question of 'Whether?' but of 'When?'^{xxviii}* Without justice served, heaven would not be heaven.

Since God is telling those under the altar to wait until the last soul is saved, the wrath of God, or at least the most intense wrath, seems to come when no other soul will enter the kingdom of God. That the judgment will come in God's time is reason for the saints to rest. **Judgment will prevail in God's time.** We also struggle seeing injustice go on and on and wonder why God has not acted. Like our fellow believers under the altar, we can be sure it *will* come in God's time, which should give us peace in our hearts. Some one recently told me their favorite quote was that when we die, the one thing we will most regret is that we did not trust the Lord more. Trust God to balance the books.

Those who favor a mid-tribulation rapture see this to be the point when Jesus returns for the surviving believers. What follows is called the wrath of the Lamb, which has everyone seeking to hide from the catastrophic events taking place in the world. In Matthew

24 this is described as being after the image of the beast is set up in the temple (Matthew 24:15,16). Mid-tribers point to Matthew 24:27,28 as the rapture. ²⁷ *For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.* ²⁸ *Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.* The word for vultures is also translated as eagles. What follows in Matthew 24 sounds like the sixth seal with the heavens and earth shaken.

However, I see no reason not to see the first five seals as taking place before the tribulation. Thus, the expression, “the end is not yet.” If seal six is the beginning of the seven years of tribulation, a person could see the rapture at this point and believe in pre-tribulation rapture. They point to the verse that says we are not appointed to wrath and interpret the word wrath as the tribulation period and not as God’s eternal wrath on the wicked. However, the verse contrasts wrath as the opposite of salvation ⁹ *For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,* ¹⁰ *who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.* 1 Thessalonians 5:9,10 One’s interpretation would also depend on if those who are sealed in chapter 7 are all the surviving saints who are protected from God’s judgments on the earth, thereby protecting them from the Lamb’s wrath.

And then there is also the post-tribers who point to Matthew 24:31 as the rapture near the end of the tribulation which is cut short for the elect’s sake. ³¹ *And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.* Those holding each viewpoint think those who have a different view have interpreted Scripture incorrectly. You can see how the issue can be contentious and why some of us prefer to simply say, “Pray for pre and prepare for post.” Should we slack off in our memorization of Scripture and redeeming the time as the Thessalonians did (2 Thessalonians 3:10^{xxxix}) because we may be raptured at any moment (Ephesians 5:16^{xxx})? Of course not. The Scripture tells us to never be lacking in zeal but be fervent in spirit (Romans 12:11^{xxxi}). Should we be fearful of the future if we believe we are going through all or part of the tribulation? No! Jesus tells us in Luke 12:4 ⁴ *“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.* And Paul writes to Timothy, *God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power, love, and self-control* (1 Timothy 1:7^{xxxii}).

This is not just for the last seven-year period, but for everything God allows us to face in our lives. We live in a fallen world. While Christ has conquered death and hell, man is still free to choose, and man is usually wicked and easily influenced by the temptations of evil and their own fallen nature. That means we will face injustice, persecution, and the ravages of nature. God uses those things to judge the wicked and refine the saints, just as He will to an even greater degree in the last seven years.

This we do know. Paul makes it clear in 2 Thessalonians 2 that the rapture will not take place until the antichrist is revealed. Some of the Thessalonians were falsely taught that the rapture had already occurred, and they had missed it. Paul wrote to assure them. ³ *Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,* ⁴ *who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.* 2 Thessalonians 2:3,4 Paul clearly taught that the rebellion or falling away and the revealing of the antichrist must come before the rapture, or as Paul puts it, *our gathering together unto Him* (2 Thessalonians 2:14-17^{xxxiii}).

I do not think the point of these warnings of what is to come is to have us clearly understand the details of future events and their exact order. Rather, it is to assure us that God is on the throne of heaven. He will see that everyone has heard the gospel and has chosen sides. We do not need to fear what we will endure for we know God's promises to us. The churches in Asia Minor did not need to fear Rome and the persecution that was coming. Of course there was concern for loss of material goods, even physical pain and the loss of loved ones. But that which is eternal is in the hands of God who loves us. This short life will soon be over (2 Corinthians 4:17^{xxxiv}). It will seem like a dream. We know that we can trust God who oversees it all and who will help us face whatever comes. The souls under the altar will see in time that God is just. Righteousness will prevail. Lies will be silenced. Truth will be clear to all. In the end, it will not be knowing the order of events that will remain but understanding that God is perfectly holy, loving, merciful, and righteous and just.

¹² When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Revelation 6:12-14 This comes from the same passage that Peter quoted at Pentecost (Acts 2:19,20^{xxxv}). It comes from Joel 2:30,31^{xxxvi}). The reason Peter quoted it was that the next verse declares, *³² And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.* Joel 2:32 Peter was telling the crowd the last days had come when anyone can call on the Lord and be saved. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection made that possible. But the verses have a very apocalyptic tone. They cover the entire church age from beginning to end. In those last terrible days, it seems that many may call out to God.

¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" Revelation 6:15-17 When that day comes, it will not matter your status in life or the amount of your savings.

In the letter to the Hebrews we read, *²⁷ The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken--that is, created things--so that what cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."* Hebrews 12:27-29 (NIV) The sixth seal brings mankind to their knees. Every knee will bow (Philippians 2:10^{xxxvii}). And the scroll is not yet opened. One more seal must yet be opened.

We may live to see this, or we are raptured first, but what we should realize is that all the earthly things that we tend to value, our home, our possessions, where we live, all will be gone one day. Are we living for the transient or the eternal? ...*let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ...*

Questions:

1 How does Mt.24:6,7 parallel this passage?

- 2 What connects verses 9-11 with 7:13-16?
- 3 How does Mt.24:9,10 parallel verse 9?
- 4 Why are the souls under the altar asking to be avenged?
- 5 Review the first Hamilton quote.
- 6 Have you ever cried out, “How long O Lord?”
- 7 What does the differences of opinions about timing of the rapture tell us?
- 8 Why do we have no need to fear?
- 9 What must happen before the rapture?
- 10 What is the message of this chapter?

i 1 Timothy 1:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

ii Romans 12:1 (ESV)

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

iii Psalm 141:2 (ESV)

² Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!

iv Hebrews 8:5 (ESV)

⁵ They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.”

v Psalm 35:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ How long, O Lord, will you look on? Rescue me from their destruction, my precious life from the lions!

vi Psalm 74:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever?

vii Psalm 94:3 (ESV)

³ O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?

viii Psalm 79:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes!

ix 2 Peter 3:9 (ESV)

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

x Genesis 4:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ And the LORD said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.

xi Hebrews 11:4 (ESV)

⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

xii Deuteronomy 32:4 (ESV)

⁴ “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

xiii Matthew 16:24 (ESV)

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

xiv Matthew 10:39 (ESV)

³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

xv Romans 8:36 (ESV)

³⁶ As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

xvi Revelation 20:4 (ESV)

⁴ Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

^{xvii} **Revelation 20:5-6 (ESV)**

⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.

⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

^{xviii} James M. Hamilton Jr., *Preaching the Word: Revelation—The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 181.

^{xix} **1 Timothy 6:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.

^{xx} **Matthew 6:21 (ESV)**

²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

^{xxi} **Matthew 22:37-40 (ESV)**

³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

^{xxii} **Romans 12:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

^{xxiii} **Hebrews 11:4 (ESV)**

⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

^{xxiv} **Zechariah 1:12 (ESV)**

¹² Then the angel of the LORD said, ‘O LORD of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?’

^{xxv} **Zechariah 1:13-16 (ESV)**

¹³ And the LORD answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. ¹⁴ So the angel who talked with me said to me, ‘Cry out, Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. ¹⁵ And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. ¹⁶ Therefore, thus says the LORD, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the LORD of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem.

^{xxvi} G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 393.

^{xxvii} **Matthew 24:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

^{xxviii} Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 110.

^{xxix} **2 Thessalonians 3:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

^{xxx} **Ephesians 5:16 (KJV)**

¹⁶ Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

^{xxxi} **Romans 12:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

^{xxxii} **2 Timothy 1:7 (ESV)**

⁷ for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

^{xxxiii} **2 Thessalonians 2:1 (ESV)**

¹ Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers,

^{xxxiv} **2 Corinthians 4:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

^{xxxv} **Acts 2:19-20 (ESV)**

¹⁹ And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; ²⁰ the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

^{xxxvi} **Joel 2:30-31 (ESV)**

³⁰ “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke.

³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.

^{xxxvii} **Philippians 2:10 (NIV)**

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,