

**Revelation 6: 9; "I saw under the Altar", Sermon # 59 in the series -  
"The Faithful and True Witness", Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall  
on June 10th, 2007, in the Afternoon Worship Service.**

I have now touched upon the persecutions of 9 of the 10 persecuting Emperors of the Roman Empire which is the "earth" which is being spoken of here in the second to the fourth seals of this book of God's providential orderings. The fifth seal does not pertain exclusively to the Emperor Diocletian, who is the last of these persecuting Emperors; nor does it have to be referred specifically to any particular time period within the years 97 to 323 A.D. The "cry" of "the souls under the altar," the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held, should be seen and understood as the cry of all of the martyrs of this first period of church history. It is, no doubt, also the cry of all of the martyrs of Christ in all generations of Church history before the Millennium, all of which long for the time when Christ's cause and kingdom will triumph upon the earth; when the Word of God and the testimony of the faithful in all generations before, shall be vindicated. But this 5th seal has no horse and no rider and no Living Creature saying, "Come and see." The gospel has gone forth conquering and to conquer, and it has done so, through the preaching of the gospel and the sufferings of those dear saints who would not sacrifice to false gods or worship the Emperor. But the persecutions have been many, and they have been long. This last and 10th persecution was the worst of all. The historian Supicius Severus says, "Under the reign of Diocletian and Maximian, for ten years the persecution continually preyed upon the Lord's people during which space the whole world was full of the sacred blood of martyrs." "Never was the world more exhausted by war; and never did we conquer by a greater triumph, than when with ten years suffering we could not be overcome." This afternoon I want to speak about the "souls under the altar". I am hoping that we will come to understand more about what it means to suffer with and for Christ. I am hoping that we will understand more about the state of death for the Christian, the one who suffers for Christ. I want to speak to you first about the altar spoken of in these verses. Then, secondly, I would like you to see the souls of the martyrs under this altar. And then finally I would like you to see the consolation which is given to these saints that had suffered, in their eternally blessed state in heaven.

**1st- The Altar spoken of in these verses-**

"When He, that is Jesus Christ, "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." This altar is the place where sacrifices were offered which

were acceptable to God. In the Old Testament times it was God who commanded where and how sacrifices were to be made to Himself. Abraham was commanded by God in Genesis 22: 2 to "take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." In verse 9 it says, "Then they came to the place of which God had told him, and Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar upon the wood." The law of the burnt offering is explained further in the book of Leviticus Chapter 1, verses 2-4. "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord you shall bring your offering of the livestock--of the herd and of the flock.' "If his offering is a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the Lord." "Then he shall put his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him. "He shall kill the bull before the Lord; and the priest, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood and sprinkle the blood all around on the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of the meeting." Our Lord Jesus Christ has become the fulfillment of these types of His sacrifice, which I have mentioned, which were offered. He is the "Isaac" offered by God the Father. It was His blood being shed in sacrifice that is accepted by God for atonement. Indeed it is His finished work on the wood of the cross as an offering for sin which has accomplished our salvation. Listen to Hebrews 13: 10 and following. "We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat." "For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp." "Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate." Therefore let us go forth to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach." "For here we have no continuing city." Jesus is the only High Priest, He is the only sacrifice for our sins, and His righteous life is the only altar which He built to offer this sacrifice of Himself upon. God the Father sent Him to the cross and He went willingly bound by cords of His love to all of God's Elect. There He died for the sins of all God's people. Since He suffered at the hands of wicked men, we are instructed to prepare ourselves to do the same. This is "going outside the camp", bearing the reproach of Christ, "considering this to be greater riches than the treasures of the world. This is what the people in Diocletian's day were called to. Their sufferings did not accomplish their salvation. Only Christ could do that. But their sufferings were a sacrifice which was pleasing to God because they had placed their lives under the altar of Christ in identification with Him, and in service to Him whether by life or by death.

**Now 2ndly- I want you to see the souls of the martyrs which are under this Altar.**

"The souls," which John saw "under the altar" are those whose sufferings for the testimony of Christ and the truth of God's Word had been accepted by God. Turn to 2 Timothy 4: 6. Paul is giving Timothy instructions to be faithful to preach the Word, "in season and out of season." He tells him to be "watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, and fulfill his ministry." "For," he says in verse 6, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure is at hand." The drink offerings, or libations, were the wine that was poured out at the base of the altar or sometimes upon the sacrifice itself. Paul thought of his upcoming death, the shedding of his blood in martyrdom to Christ as just such a sacrifice. It would not be atoning but it would be pleasing to God. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones," it says in Psalm 116: 15.

This is also how precious to God, the death of these Christians was, who suffered under the cruel persecutions of Diocletian and the other Roman Emperors. God looked upon their sufferings and death for Christ's cause, with supreme satisfaction. He placed their souls under the altar of Christ, deserving of special regard and reward for their service to Him. "If we suffer with Him, we shall also reign with Him." Think of some of those who suffered under the reign of Diocletian. He, at first, had opposed the persecution of the Christians, but then was convinced by Galerius, his co-Emperor to go ahead with it. Listen to Lactantius. "So during the whole winter of 303 A.D., Diocletian and Galerius held councils together, at which no one else assisted; and it was the universal opinion that their conferences respected the most momentous affairs of the Empire." The old man long opposed the fury of Galerius, and showed how pernicious it would be to raise disturbances throughout the world and to shed so much blood; that the Christians were wont with eagerness to meet death; and that it would be enough for him to exclude persons of that religion from the court and the army." "Yet he could not restrain the madness of that obstinate man." "He resolved, therefore to take the opinion of his friends." "Now this was a circumstance in the bad disposition of Diocletian, that whenever he determined to do good, he did it without advice, that the praise might be all his own; but whenever he determined to do ill, which he was sensible would be blamed, he called in many advisers, that his own fault might be imputed to other men." "He determined above all to consult his gods; and to that end he dispatched a soothsayer to inquire of Apollo at Miletus, whose answer was such as might be expected from an enemy of the divine religion." "So Diocletian was drawn over from his purpose." "A fit and auspicious day was sought out for the accomplishment of this undertaking; and the festival of the god Terminus,

celebrated on the seventh of the Kalends of March, was chosen in preference all others, to terminate as it were, the Christian religion." "When that day dawned, in the eighth consulship of Diocletian and seventh of Maximian, suddenly, while it was yet hardly light, the prefect, together with chief commanders, tribunes, and officers of the treasury, came to the church in Nicomedia, and the gates having been forced open, they searched everywhere for an image of the Divinity." "The books of the Holy Scriptures were found, and they were committed to the flames; the utensils and furniture of the church were abandoned to pillage: all was plunder, confusion, and tumult." "That church, situated on rising ground, was within view of the palace; and Diocletian and Galerius stood, as if on a watch-tower, disputing long whether it ought to be set on fire." "The sentiment of Diocletian prevailed, who dreaded lest, so great a fire being once kindled, some part of the city might be burnt; for there were many and large buildings that surrounded the church." "Then the Praetorian guards came in battle array, with axes and other iron instruments, and having been let loose everywhere, they in a few hours leveled that very lofty edifice with the ground." "The next day an edict was published, depriving the Christians of all honors and dignities; ordaining also that, without any distinction of rank or degree, they should be subjected to tortures, and that every suit at law should be received against them; while, on the other hand, they were debarred from being plaintiffs in questions of wrong, adultery, or theft; and finally, that they should neither be capable of freedom, nor have right of suffrage."

This was only the beginning of the slaughter. It would take me too long today to read to you of the terrible and insufferable persecutions of God's saints that took place in those times. But I should give you several instances. This is from John Foxe. "A legion of soldiers, consisting of about 6000 men, were all Christians." "It was called the Theban Legion, and they had been quartered in the East till the Emperor Maximian ordered them to march to Gaul to assist in fighting against the rebels of Aquitania." "Passing the Alps under the command of their captain, they at length joined the Emperor." "Before engaging with the enemy Maximian ordered a general sacrifice, at which the whole army was to assist." "He commanded that men should also take oaths of allegiance, and swear to assist him in driving Christianity out of Gaul." "Deeply concerned at these orders, each man of the Theban Legion resolutely refused either to sacrifice or take the oaths prescribed." "This so greatly enraged Maximian that he ordered the legion to be decimated, that is, every tenth man to be selected from the rest, and put to the sword." "This cruel order was at once carried out, but those who remained were still firm." "A second decimation then took place, and every tenth man of those living was killed." "But this second slaughter made no more impression than the first." "By the advice of their officers the

remnant of the legion drew up a remonstrance to the Emperor, in which the men said they were his subjects and his soldiers, but could not forget the Almighty." "They received their pay from the Emperor, but their lives were given them by God." "They said: "Our arms are devoted to the Emperor's use, and shall be directed against his enemies; but we cannot stain our hands with Christian blood; and how, indeed, could you, O Emperor!" "Be sure of our fidelity, should we violate our obligation to our God, in whose service we solemnly engaged before we entered the army." "You command us to search out and to destroy the Christians; it is not necessary to look any farther than ourselves; we ourselves are Christians and we glory in the name." "We saw our companions fall without the least complaint, and thought them happy in dying for the sake of Christ." "But nothing shall make us lift up our hands against our sovereign; we would rather die wrongfully, and by that means preserve our innocence, than live under a load of guilt." "Whatever you command, we are ready to suffer: we confess ourselves to be Christians, and therefore cannot persecute our brothers nor sacrifice to idols." "Such a noble reply it might be supposed, would have moved the Emperor to mercy, but it had a contrary effect." "Enraged at their continued refusal to obey, he commanded the whole legion to be put to death, which order was at once carried out by the other troops, who cut them to pieces with their swords." My brethren, how precious is this kind of loyalty to our God. It proves everything about the truth and the reality of the strength and power of Christ's grace to not only stand in the evil day, but to overcome in the evil day. Thanks be to God!

**And now in closing, I would like you to see the consolation which is given to these saints that had suffered, in their eternally blessed state in heaven.**

The lesson that we should learn from what we have heard today is that any sacrificial suffering done on Christ's behalf will be taken special notice of by our God. Martyrdom for His sake is especially taken notice of because it is the giving of one's life for sake of testimony to Christ and the Word of God. Suffering a violent death for any other reason is not truly martyrdom. The souls of any who have suffered martyrdom for Christ are found under the Altar in heaven. Christ is that Altar. They offered themselves up on the sacrifice and service of Christ's faith; that He would and did accomplish on the cross, everything necessary for their eternal salvation. And this included the powerful grace that it would take to enable them to triumph over the most awful and desperate schemes of the evil one. These martyrs are now with Christ, in His immediate presence, sitting on His throne with Him. By Christ's death and intercession and grace, their souls are now ministered to by our Lord Himself in a most beautiful and powerful way. Verse 11 says, "Then a white robe was given

to each of them: 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. The white robe given to them speaks of their having righteously ministered to their Lord, and His having brought them beyond the messy, bloody, and impossibly difficult situations that they faced here upon the earth. They shall be perfectly pleased and satisfied to be in his presence forevermore. They are given eternal rest and eternal peace. Next week we will look at the subject of our Lord's the avenging of the martyr's blood, and how He answers their question of how long it would be until their blood was avenged upon the earth.