

Revelation week #15

Prayers for Vengeance: The Fifth Seal

(Revelation 6:9–11)

I. Introduction

- a. It has been observed that God created man in His image and man has returned the favor.
- b. People have created gods in whatever form pleases them and accommodates their sinful lifestyles.
- c. In the cynical words of British author D. H. Lawrence, “God is only a great imaginative experience” (cited in *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*, Copyright © 1993, 1995 by Columbia University Press).
- d. God rebuked such foolish people in Psalm 50:21: “You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes.”
- e. God is who He has revealed Himself to be in Scripture and not what people imagine Him to be.
- f. While Scripture reveals that God is loving, merciful, and gracious—a savior of sinners, one truth about Him that is decidedly unpopular today is that He is a God of vengeance against those who reject Him and salvation in His Son.
- g. The Bible repeatedly affirms that to be the case.
 - i. In Deuteronomy 32:35 God declared, “Vengeance is Mine, and retribution” (cf. vv. 41, 43).

- ii. In several psalms, known as the imprecatory (from the verb *imprecate*, meaning “to call down calamity on someone”) psalms, the psalmists cry out for God to take vengeance on the wicked.
- iii. One such passage is found in Psalm 64:7–9, where David says of the wicked that “God will shoot at them with an arrow; suddenly they will be wounded. So they will make him stumble; their own tongue is against them; all who see them will shake the head. Then all men will fear, and they will declare the work of God, and will consider what He has done.”
- iv. Psalm 79:10 reads, “Let there be known among the nations in our sight, vengeance for the blood of Your servants which has been shed.” In Psalm 94, the psalmist prayed, “O Lord, God of vengeance, God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O Judge of the earth, render recompense to the proud. ... He has brought back their wickedness upon them and will destroy them in their evil; the Lord our God will destroy them” (vv. 1–2, 23).
- v. Other imprecatory psalms include 7, 35, 40, 55, 58, 59, 69, 109, 137, 139, and 144.
- h. The prophets, too, spoke of God’s vengeance. Isaiah wrote,
 - i. Draw near, O nations, to hear; and listen, O peoples! Let the earth and all it contains hear, and the world and all that springs from it. For the

Lord's indignation is against all the nations, and His wrath against all their armies; He has utterly destroyed them, He has given them over to slaughter. So their slain will be thrown out, and their corpses will give off their stench, and the mountains will be drenched with their blood. ...

For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion. (Isa. 34:1–3, 8)

- i. Speaking of a time when God would take vengeance on Israel's enemies Jeremiah declared, "For that day belongs to the Lord God of hosts, a day of vengeance, so as to avenge Himself on His foes; and the sword will devour and be satiated and drink its fill of their blood; for there will be a slaughter for the Lord God of hosts, in the land of the north by the river Euphrates" (Jer. 46:10).
- j. The prophet Micah records God's promise to "execute vengeance in anger and wrath on the nations which have not obeyed" (Mic. 5:15), while Nahum 1:2 describes God as "a jealous and avenging God ... the Lord is avenging and wrathful. The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies."
- k. In the midst of judgment, God spares those who are His. Malachi 4:1–2 says, "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But

for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.”

- l. Isaiah comforted the fearful among his people by urging them, “Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but He will save you” (Isa. 35:4).
- m. Nor is God’s vengeance limited to the Old Testament. Jesus described the future time of God’s judgment during the time of Tribulation as the “days of vengeance” (Luke 21:22).
 - i. To the Thessalonians Paul wrote, For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power. (2 Thess. 1:6–9)
- n. Both Paul (Rom. 12:19) and the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 10:30) quote Deuteronomy 32:35, which affirms that vengeance belongs to the Lord.
- o. God’s vengeance is not to be equated with petty human vindictiveness and bitter desire for revenge. God’s holiness, righteousness, and justice demand that He take vengeance on unrepentant sinners.

- p. Vengeance belongs to God alone because all sin is ultimately against Him and an offense to Him (cf. Ps. 51:4).
- q. The knowledge that God will one day execute vengeance on those who reject Him does not justify any personal vengeance on the part of believers.
 - i. Proverbs 25:21 commands, “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.”
 - ii. Paul echoed that thought in Romans 12:19–20: “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. ‘But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ ”
 - iii. Neither Jesus (Luke 23:34), Stephen (Acts 7:60), nor Paul (1 Cor. 4:12) sought personal vengeance on their oppressors.
 - iv. Even God Himself declares, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezek. 33:11), because “The Lord ... is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).
- r. The realization that the Day of the Lord is coming in which God will take vengeance on the wicked is a bittersweet one for believers.

- i. On the one hand we rejoice, because God's glory will be put on display, sin will be done away with, the world will be taken back from the usurper, Satan, and God will be vindicated.
 - ii. But on the other hand, that day will bring about the destruction of the ungodly and their sentencing to eternal punishment.
- s. That bittersweet, almost ambivalent attitude toward God's judgment is pictured in Revelation 10:8–10:
 - i. And the voice which I heard from heaven, I heard again speaking with me, and saying, "Go, take the book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the land." So I went to the angel, telling him to give me the little book. And he said to me, "Take it and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey." I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it, and in my mouth it was sweet as honey; and when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.
- t. John's initial reaction to the judgments described in the little book was the sweet realization that God will be vindicated and His glory put on display.
 - i. But the sobering realization of the horrors that would be inflicted on unbelievers nauseated him.
 - ii. God is patient to penitent sinners who embrace the gospel, but there will come a time when He will no longer withhold His judgment on those who reject it.

- iii. He gave the sinful pre-Flood world 120 years to repent (Gen. 6:3), proclaiming the message of salvation to them through Noah.
- iv. But at the end of that time, the judgment of the Flood came and destroyed them all. Similarly, in the future there will come a day when grace will end and judgment will fall on everyone.
- v. “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance,” the apostle Paul declared to the philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens, “God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30–31).
- u. It is the anticipation of that coming great day of God’s wrath known as the Day of the Lord that is in view in the fifth seal.
 - i. That day will come during the seven-year period of Tribulation (the Seventieth Week of Dan. 9:27), particularly during the last three-and-one-half-year period that Jesus described as the “great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will” (Matt. 24:21; cf. Rev. 7:14).
 - ii. The first four seals, false peace, war, famine, and death, will take place during the first three and one-half years of the Tribulation, the period Jesus

called “the beginning of birth pangs” (Matt. 24:8).

- iii. Just as a woman’s labor pains increase in intensity as the time to give birth draws near, so also will the terrifying events of God’s judgment increase in painful intensity as the return of Jesus Christ approaches. The full force of God’s wrath will be unleashed during the second half of the Tribulation.
- v. The fifth seal marks the midpoint of the Tribulation period in bridging the gap between the beginning of God’s wrath in the first half of the Tribulation and its full fury revealed in the second half.
- w. Like the horsemen of the first four seals, it also portrays a force.
 - i. That force is the prayers of God’s saints for Him to exact vengeance on rebellious mankind.
- x. Three features become evident as the fifth seal is unveiled: the persons involved, the petition they have, and the promise they receive.

II. THE PERSONS

- a. (6:9)
- b. As with the first four seals, when the Lamb (the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone has authority to take back the universe; cf. 5:4–5) broke the fifth seal another sequence in the unfolding of divine judgment was revealed, in which John saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain.

- c. These are martyrs, killed during the time of all the judgments.
- d. In addition to divine judgment through the false peace, war, famine, and disease dominating the unbelieving world, there will be widespread persecution of believers led by Satan, his demons, and the final Antichrist.
- e. Jesus taught that identical sequence of events in His Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24.
- f. The first seven verses of Matthew 24 describe the events of the first four seals.
 - i. Just as the fifth seal describes martyrs, so also does Jesus 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.”
 - ii. The event that marks the midpoint of the Tribulation, the setting up of the “abomination of desolation,” does not occur until verse 15 of Matthew 24.
 - iii. Therefore the persecution Jesus spoke of (that associated with the fifth seal) will begin in the first half of the Tribulation and escalate in the second half, after the abomination of desolation.
- g. The “abomination of desolation” is referred to three times in Daniel’s prophecy (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) to describe the desecration of the temple in the second century B. C. by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes.

- h. The yet future “abomination of desolation” Jesus described in Matthew 24:15 will be similar to Antiochus’s act.
 - i. At that time, the final Antichrist will set himself up in the temple to be worshiped as God (2 Thess. 2:3–4).
 - ii. The removal of what now restrains him (2 Thess. 2:6–7) will permit Antichrist and his evil followers to run rampant.
 - iii. The power that will keep Antichrist from fully manifesting his evil can be none other than the power of God.
 - iv. He will keep Antichrist from manifesting himself before God’s appointed time.
 - v. He will then remove the restraining force and allow that Satan-possessed false christ to fully manifest his apostasy.
- i. The persecution will, even in its initial phase, be worldwide in scope.
 - i. Jesus warned, “You will be hated by all nations because of My name” (Matt. 24:9).
 - ii. That verse also implies that the persecution will be tolerated, if not actively led, by the world’s governments.
 - iii. It will also be religious in nature, led by the false, worldwide, ecumenical religious system involved in worshiping the Antichrist (cf. Rev. 17:1–6).

- iv. The world's hatred for God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ will motivate them to persecute believers (cf. 16:9, 11, 21).
- j. Inevitably, the persecution will sift those who outwardly identify with Jesus Christ.
 - i. As has been true throughout the history of the church, there will be tares mingled with the wheat (Matt. 13:24–43).
 - ii. But the persecution, as it always does, will reveal who is truly redeemed and who is not.
 - iii. Jesus described this sifting process in Matthew 24:10–12: “At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold.”
- k. False believers will reveal their lack of genuine saving faith by defecting.
 - i. First John 2:19 describes such people: “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.”
 - ii. Genuine believers, on the other hand, will, as always, remain loyal to Jesus Christ, since “the one who endures to the end, he will be saved” (Matt. 24:13).
 - iii. The redeemed persevere through any trial, including persecution and martyrdom.

1. The world's hostility toward Jesus Christ and His followers will not be able to prevent the "gospel of the kingdom" from being "preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations" (Matt. 24:14).
 - i. The preachers will include 144,000 Jewish evangelists (7:1–8; 14:1–5), two powerful preachers known as the two witnesses (11:3ff.), and an angel flying through the sky (14:6–7).
 - ii. So effective will their preaching be that those who will respond to it and are saved are described in Revelation 7:9 as "a great multitude which no one could count."
- m. As noted earlier, the "abomination of desolation" will be the event that causes the persecution to greatly increase in intensity.
 - i. It will occur halfway through the seven-year tribulation period when Antichrist defiles the temple by setting up in it an idol of himself and demanding that the world worship him as God.
 - ii. With that blasphemous act, Antichrist will be unmasked for the Satan-possessed false christ that he is.
 - iii. At that point the world will no longer view Antichrist as merely a political leader and deliverer.
 - iv. Because his "coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9), the world will be deceived into worshiping him as a deity.

- n. Revelation 13:3–4 teaches that this worldwide worship of Antichrist will be motivated by the power of Satan:
“The whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast [Antichrist]; they worshiped the dragon [Satan] because he gave his authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?’ ”
 - i. Antichrist will exalt himself, speaking “arrogant words and blasphemies,” and be granted by God authority to carry out his blasphemous enterprise for forty-two months (13:5)—the second half of the Tribulation.
- o. The persecution of believers, which began early in the first half of the Tribulation, will intensify dramatically after Antichrist sets himself up as God.
 - i. At that time he will “make war with the saints and ... overcome them” (13:7).
 - ii. With the whole world worshiping Antichrist as God, believers will be considered blasphemers for opposing him.
 - iii. That will bring upon them persecution from Antichrist’s false religious system.
 - iv. Revelation 9:21 speaks of the proliferation of murders at this time; many of the victims will no doubt be believers, the victims of mob violence.
- p. In His Olivet Discourse Jesus also spoke of the intensifying persecution that will mark this time:
 - i. Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains; whoever is on the housetop must not

go down to get the things out that are in his house. Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath. For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. (Matt. 24:16–22)

- q. The only defense against the sudden onslaught of persecution, Jesus said, will be immediate flight.
 - i. Those unable to flee quickly enough, such as pregnant and nursing women, will be slaughtered.
 - ii. So severe will the persecution become that none would survive unless God shortened the time of persecution.
 - iii. Revelation 7:9–14 indicates that the slaughter will be on a massive scale, resulting in victims from every nation too numerous to count.
- r. John described the martyrs he saw underneath the altar as souls because their bodily resurrection had not yet taken place (cf. 20:4).
 - i. They are the firstfruits of those who will be saved throughout the Tribulation.

- ii. Some of them will be Jewish, foreshadowing the salvation of Israel as a whole at the end of the Tribulation (Zech. 12:10; 14:1; Rom. 11:26–29).
- s. The text does not define which altar is in view, nor does the scene in heaven parallel the earthly temple (or tabernacle), which had no throne (cf. 4:2).
 - i. The altar John saw is most likely representative of the altar of incense in the Old Testament (Ex. 40:5), because of the association of incense with prayer (cf. 5:8; 8:3–4; Ps. 141:2; Luke 1:10).
- t. John gives two reasons why the martyrs will be slain: because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained.
- u. They will correctly interpret what they see going on around them in the world in the light of Scripture.
 - i. They will proclaim from the Bible God's judgment and call on people to repent and believe the gospel.
 - ii. Antichrist and his followers, however, will not tolerate their bold preaching and will persecute and kill them.
 - iii. Because of the testimony which they had maintained refers to their loyalty to Jesus Christ (cf. 1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4), which was demonstrated by their proclamation of the Word of God in the face of life-threatening hatred and hostility.
 - iv. In a world bereft of the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit, merciless men will murder those

who faithfully and courageously proclaim the message of judgment and salvation.

III. The Petition.

- a. (6:10)
- b. The fifth seal is not martyrdom, as some suggest, because martyrdom could not be judgment from God.
- c. The seals depict God's wrath and judgment on the evil and ungodly—not His children.
- d. The force, then, that is involved in the fifth seal is the prayers of the Tribulation martyrs for God to enact vengeance on their Christ-rejecting murderers.
- e. Prayer will play a vital role in the outpouring of God's judgments on the earth.
- f. This prayer is very different from the one by the martyr Stephen (Acts 7:60) in which he prayed for his killers to not be held guilty by God.
- g. This prayer of the martyrs is more like the im-pre-ca-tory psalm
 - i. **Imprecatory psalms** are those psalms that contain curses or prayers for the punishment of the psalmist's enemies. To imprecate means to invoke evil upon, or curse. Psalms 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137 and 139 all contain prayers for God's judgment on the psalmist's enemies. Example imprecatory statements from the Psalms follow:
 - ii. "Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave." Psalm 55:15
 - iii. "O God, break the teeth in their mouths." Psalm 58:6
 - iv. "May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous." Psalm 69:28
 - v. "May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow." Psalm 109:9

- vi. "How blessed will be the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." Psalm 137:9
- h. A prayer for pardon is appropriate in a time of grace.
 - i. But when grace is finished and judgment comes, prayers for divine, holy retribution are fitting.
 - ii. Such prayers are not from a desire for revenge, but are a protest against all that is sinful, unholy, dishonoring to God, and destructive to His creation.
- i. Many Christians act as if prayer were a mere formality that has little effect.
 - i. Yet, amazingly, the prayers of the Tribulation martyrs will move God's hand of judgment.
 - ii. Jesus illustrated that same principle in the parable of the persistent widow and the unrighteous judge: "Will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly" (Luke 18:7–8).
 - iii. The prayers of the Tribulation martyrs will participate in activating the torments of the sixth and seventh seals along with the trumpet and bowl judgments which follow.
- j. God's hand of judgment will move in response to the martyrs because their prayers will be urgent, fervent, impassioned, and consistent with His purpose and will.

- k. *Krazō* (cried out) is a strong word that emphasizes the urgent need and denotes strong emotions (cf. Matt. 9:27; 14:26, 30; 15:22; 20:30–31; Mark 9:24).
 - i. The twenty-four elders and the angels loudly praised God (5:12), and the Tribulation martyrs will petition Him with a loud voice.
 - ii. In keeping with their call for vengeance and justice, they address Him as the Lord, holy and true.
 - iii. Lord does not translate *kurios*, the common New Testament word for Lord, but the stronger term *despotēs* (“master,” “ruler”).
 - iv. It speaks of God the Father’s might, power, majesty, and authority.
- l. The martyrs base their appeal for vengeance on two of God’s attributes.
 - i. Because God is holy, He must judge sin (cf. Ps. 5:4–5; Hab. 1:13; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 3:6; 2 Tim. 4:1); because He is true, He must be faithful to His word and keep His promises (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Luke 21:33).
 - ii. Revelation 3:7 applies this phrase holy and true to Jesus Christ, thus affirming His deity and full equality with His Father.
- m. The martyrs’ question “How long ... will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” does not reflect a personal vendetta on their part.

- i. They are not trying to tell God what to do or when to do it; 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.
 - ii. How long is a well-known cry of suffering Israel, reflecting the perplexing question of the righteous as to when their pain will end (cf. Pss. 13:1; 35:17).
 - iii. The phrase those who dwell on the earth is a technical one which refers throughout Revelation to the ungodly (cf. 3:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12; 17:2, 8).
 - iv. As was the case with murdered Abel, the very ground cries out for their blood to be required at the hands of their killers.
 - n. The time of grace is nearing its end. No longer do God's people ask God to forgive their enemies.
 - i. The time is fast approaching when God will judge His enemies, and the Lord Jesus Christ will take His rightful place as earth's ruler.
 - ii. But since these martyrs are from the first half of the Tribulation, the "beginning of birth pangs," that time is still a little way off.
- IV. The Promise.
- a. (6:11)
 - b. Two elements make up God's response to His martyred saints: a symbolic gift, and a spoken word.

- c. The gift that was given to each of them by God as they arrived in heaven was a white robe (*stolē*; a long robe flowing to the feet).
- d. These long, brilliant white robes were a reward of grace (cf. 7:9, 14), symbolizing God's gift of eternal righteousness, blessedness, dignity, and honor (cf. 3:5).
 - i. They symbolize all the glory that redeemed saints will enjoy in heaven.
 - ii. These were not actual robes, since what is depicted in this vision is before the resurrection of the bodies of the redeemed, which occurs for Tribulation saints at Christ's return (20:4–5).
- e. Along with this gift came God's spoken word, namely that they should rest for a little while longer.
 - i. That is not a rebuke for impatience, since impatience is a sin and perfected people in heaven do not sin.
 - ii. 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 wrath arrives.
 - iii. The phrase for a little while longer (cf. John 7:33; 12:35) indicates that that time will not be long delayed.
 - iv. As indicated earlier, this seal is best seen as describing a period in the middle of the seven years of tribulation.
 - v. There is a verbal similarity to the phrase in Revelation 10:6, "there will be delay no longer,"

which obviously ends the delay of which God spoke to the martyrs in 6:11.

- f. Some time will clearly elapse between 6:11 and 10:6. God's day of judgment and vengeance is about three and a half years ahead, and will not come until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.
- g. God sovereignly predetermined the exact number of those who would be killed. The petitioners were told to enjoy heaven's rest until that number had been reached.
 - i. Robert L. Thomas notes, The word 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 yet transpire beforehand is the increase of their number through additional martyrdoms. The earth dwellers under the dawning leadership of the beast from the sea will take an even greater toll of human lives before Christ finally intervenes through His personal arrival back on earth. Until then, the already martyred are told to rest and enjoy their state of blessedness already attained. (*Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 499)
- h. Fellow servants and brethren are two classes of people.

- i. The first group was alive and willing to die like the martyrs, though they may not.
- ii. The second group were those who will be killed.
- i. The world is not too enlightened, humane, civilized, educated, or sophisticated to avoid repeating the atrocities of the past.
- j. In fact, the atrocities of the Tribulation will far exceed any that have gone before.
- k. With God's supernatural restraint on sin removed and the forces of hell running rampant, the slaughter of that time will be without precedent in human history.
- l. But out of those dark and evil days will come thousands who sealed their testimony for the Word of God and the lordship of Jesus Christ with their own blood.¹

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 187–199.