

# 14

## Souls Under the Altar

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

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

And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled (Rev. 6:9-11).

The breaking of the first four seals of the seven-sealed scroll, revealing *four horsemen riding forth*, provides a general description of a sequence of events which will occur and conditions which will exist during the Tribulation, *covering, in actuality, the entire seven years*. One might view the breaking of these first four seals as a *skeletal framework for the Tribulation*, with subsequent revelation beginning in the latter part of chapter six and continuing through chapter nineteen providing the necessary commentary — the sinews, flesh, and skin, as it were — to properly cover the skeletal framework (cf. Ezek. 37:1-10).

God opened His Word in this respect by providing a *skeletal framework for the whole of His revelation to man* in the first thirty-four

verses of Genesis, with all subsequent Scripture then providing the necessary commentary — the sinews, flesh, and skin — to properly cover the skeletal framework. And, if the relationship between *events surrounding the four horsemen* in chapter six and *events covering the Tribulation in the remainder of the book* are to be viewed in the apparent same respect, God, as well, is seen closing His revelation to man in a *very similar respect* to the way He opened this revelation.

After the first four seals had been broken (6:1-8), the breaking of the fifth seal revealed *souls under the altar*. This scene results from that previously brought to pass when the first four seals had been broken. Then, additional revelation is given in the book to fill in the details, providing commentary, for that revealed when the fifth seal is broken (*e.g.*, all of ch. 7 and parts of chs. 11, 12, 14).

Who are these souls under the altar? They couldn't be Christians, for all Christians — comprising all of the saved at the time of the rapture — will have previously been removed. And, since all saved individuals will have previously been removed, where had the souls under the altar heard the salvation message?

Also, note the faith possessed by those seen under the altar. These are individuals possessing *faith of a nature for which they had relinquished their lives*. They had been “slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held” (v. 9). They were *martyrs*.

Then, chapter seven, providing subsequent commentary, describes these individuals as “a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues...” (v. 9a). And, so that there could be no mistake, they are specifically said to have come “out of great tribulation [*lit.*, ‘out of the Great Tribulation’]” (v. 14).

(In the Greek text, the adjective [‘great’] follows the noun [‘tribulation’], and both words are preceded by the definite article. Thus, one could translate, “the Tribulation, the Great one.” That in view is not just any tribulation or affliction, but a *specific one*; and, in addition, it is further singled out and identified as “the Great one.”

*E.g.*, compare this with the same noun and adjective [used in the

same order] in Rev. 2:22, without an article preceding either word. In this verse, *great affliction*, unrelated to *the Great Tribulation*, is in view.

*The Great Tribulation* is the time of which Daniel spoke, following “the prince that shall come” breaking his covenant with “many” in Israel; and it is that time of which Jesus spoke in the Olivet Discourse, after the Jewish people will have seen “the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand [‘standing’] in the holy place” [Matt. 24:15ff; cf. Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11].)

Thus, those seen under the altar when the fifth seal is broken are saved individuals who had been slain for their faith during the latter part of the Tribulation, during that time which Scripture refers to as “the Tribulation, the Great one,” or simply “the Great Tribulation.” The scene though does not picture all of the martyrs of the Tribulation. Reference is made to “fellow servants” and “brethren” who were still alive, in the Tribulation, who would ultimately be slain as well (6:11b).

(The scene in Rev. 6:9-11 pictures *a sacrifice of individuals, with their blood having been poured out beneath the altar*. “The altar” is an allusion to the brazen altar in the courtyard of the Temple. This altar was the place where *the sacrifice occurred*, and *the blood of the sacrifice* was poured out beneath the altar [Lev. 1:11; 4:4-7]. These individuals, as many Christians prior to that time, had presented their bodies “a living sacrifice” [Rom. 12:1], and they had been “faithful unto death” [Rev. 2:10].)

As previously seen, that revealed when the fifth seal is broken results from events brought to pass through the breaking of the previous four seals (cf. Rev. 20:4).

With the breaking of *the first seal*, a man was seen riding forth on a *white horse*, with a view to *worldwide conquest* (6:1, 2); with the breaking of *the second seal*, a man was seen riding forth on a *red horse*, holding “a great sword” and possessing power “to take peace from the earth,” resulting in men killing “one another” (vv. 3, 4); with the breaking of *the third seal*, a man was seen riding forth on a *black horse*, depicting *famine* (vv. 5, 6); then, with the breaking of *the fourth seal*, a man was seen riding forth on a *pale horse*, depicting *death* (vv. 7, 8).

All of these things set the stage for the breaking of the fifth seal. And the next chapter (ch. 7) provides explanatory commentary for a number of things seen when this seal is broken, with further explanation given additional places later in the book. The Book of Revelation is self-interpreting in this respect, with Scripture numerous other places shedding additional light on different things throughout the book.

### **Two Witnesses, 144,000 Evangels**

Commentary in chapter seven on that seen when the fifth seal is broken does not begin with the souls under the altar but with a lengthy reference to the sealing of 144,000 Jews, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel (vv. 1-8). And the reason for this is obvious when related Scripture on the subject is studied.

In short, as will be shown, these 144,000 will be the evangels who will carry God's message to the nations of the earth, to the Gentiles worldwide, during the last half of the Tribulation. And the souls under the altar, revealed through the opening of the fifth seal, are individuals who had been saved as a result of their ministry.

Apart from these evangels, that seen when the fifth seal is broken would not exist. Apart from these evangels there would not be "a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" who had been "slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held" (6:9; 7:9).

Thus, all of chapter seven deals with one central subject. The first eight verses deal with *the 144,000, the evangels during the last half of the Tribulation*. Then the remainder of the chapter (vv. 9-17) deals with *the results of their ministry*. These 144,000 Jews will, in a respect, do in three and one-half years that which neither *their forefathers* had done (from Abraham to Calvary) nor *the Church* will have done (from Pentecost to the rapture) in two previous, successive 2,000-year periods.

These 144,000 Jews will, collectively, be "*a first fruit [Gk., singular] of the entire nation*" (Rev. 14:4). They will do that which God

called the nation of Israel into existence to accomplish. They will be *God's witnesses to the nations* (Isa. 43:1, 9-12). And, viewing the results of their ministry over the short period of three and one-half years, think what an entire converted Jewish nation will be able to accomplish in 1,000 years when they go forth as *God's witnesses to the Gentile nations of the earth during the Millennium*.

### 1) *Bringing Forth the 144,000*

How will these 144,000 Jews themselves be saved? How will they hear the message? No Christians will be on earth to proclaim the good news; they will have been removed at the time of the rapture. And, if the 144,000 had been saved before the rapture, they would have been part of *the one new man* "in Christ" and would have been removed with the rest of the Church.

It is, of course, possible that some of those numbered among the 144,000 will have heard the message before the rapture and then reacted to the message following the rapture. But, if so, these would seemingly form only a small part of the group, for Scripture deals with the matter after another fashion.

The 144,000 are mentioned several subsequent places in the book, one place through the use of the number 144,000 (14:1-5) and at least two other places through the use of other designations (chs. 11, 12).

Part of chapter eleven (vv. 3-12) is taken up with the ministry of two unnamed witnesses whom God will send to the earth after the removal of the Church. And these two witnesses will make their appearance either at or about the time when "the prince that shall come" makes *his seven-year covenant* with "many" in Israel. These two witnesses will bear a testimony to the Jewish people, apparently in and around Jerusalem; and they will bear this testimony throughout the first three and one-half years of the Tribulation.

Nothing will be able to stop these two witnesses until "they shall have finished their testimony." But after they finish their testimony, Antichrist will be allowed to slay them, something which will evidently occur at or about the time this man *breaks his covenant* with "many" in Israel. But after three and one-half days (a day for a year of their ministry), with their bodies lying

in the streets of Jerusalem during this time, the Spirit of God will breathe life into their dead bodies. They will stand upon their feet, great fear will fall upon many, God will then remove them from the earth, and their enemies will watch as they ascend “up to heaven in a cloud” (11:5-12; *cf.* Acts 1:9-11).

It is apparent that the ministry of these two witnesses will occur during the first half of the Tribulation rather than the last half, for the Jewish people will not be in and around Jerusalem during the last half. When “the prince of the covenant” breaks his covenant in the middle of the Tribulation, the Jewish people in Judea are told to flee for their lives. And those who do not escape to a specially prepared place in the mountainous or desert terrain of the land will either be killed, driven throughout the nations of the earth, or sold as slaves to the Gentiles. Jerusalem and the Temple will then be destroyed, and Jerusalem will be “trodden down of the Gentiles” throughout the last three and one-half years of the Tribulation, “until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled” (*cf.* Dan. 9:26, 27; 11:22, 28-32; Joel 3:1-8; Matt. 24:15ff; Mark 13:14ff; Luke 21:20-24; II Thess. 2:3ff; Rev. 11:1, 2).

It is also apparent that the 144,000 will hear and respond to the salvation message through the testimony of these two witnesses, whether directly or indirectly. There is a connection between the ministry of the two witnesses and the bringing into existence of the 144,000, seen when one compares events in chapter eleven with events in chapter twelve.

Possibly more than just 144,000 will hear and respond to the message. But, regardless of the number, God will see to it that at least 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel hear and respond. God will then take these 12,000 from each tribe and seal them, as seen at the beginning of chapter seven.

In chapter twelve, three main metaphors are used — one to describe “Israel” (*a woman*), one to describe “Satan” (*a dragon*), and one to describe “the 144,000” (*a man-child*, which the woman brings forth near the middle of the Tribulation). All three metaphors are identified in the chapter, and the manner in which the man-child is identified not only connects this metaphor with the 144,000 but it also provides the connection that the 144,000

have with the two witnesses in the previous chapter, in chapter eleven.

(*The man-child*, in commentaries and other studies on the Book of Revelation, is usually identified as “Christ.” But this identification is not possible. Note that Israel brings forth the man-child in chapter twelve after all seven heads of the beast in chapter thirteen have been crowned, with *diadems*, which cannot occur until near the middle of the Tribulation [vv. 3-5]; Israel brings forth the man-child shortly after Satan and his angels have been cast out of the heavens onto the earth, which, contextually, will occur near the middle of the Tribulation [vv. 4, 5]; and Israel brings forth the man-child shortly before Antichrist breaks his covenant with the nation and the Jewish people flee for their lives [vv. 5, 6, 13ff].)

The identities of all three metaphors in chapter twelve are easily seen. *The woman* can be identified with “Israel” several ways. One way would be through statements made about her fleeing into the wilderness (vv. 6, 14; cf. Matt. 24:16ff). And *the dragon* is specifically stated to be “Satan” (v. 9).

(Note that Satan and the kingdom of Antichrist are spoken of in an inseparable manner in this chapter [vv. 3, 4], which is easy to understand from that revealed about Satan and Antichrist in the next chapter. After Antichrist comes into the power which he sought by riding out on a white horse in chapter six, Satan gives to this man “his power, and his seat [‘his throne,’ giving him regal power over the earth], and great authority.” [13:2b; cf. Luke 4:5, 6].)

But how is “the man-child” identified as *the 144,000* in this chapter? Note verse seventeen where mention is made of *a remnant of the woman’s seed*, “which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.” This remnant, specifically said to be *a saved part of the Jewish nation*, can only be identified with *the man-child*, whom Israel brought forth back in verse five.

Then note mention of *a remnant* in the previous chapter — after the two witnesses finish their testimony, are killed, are raised from the dead, and ascend to heaven (v. 13) — providing a connection between *the remnant (the man-child)* in chapter twelve and *the two*

witnesses in chapter eleven.

One can really come to only *one conclusion*. The ministry of the two witnesses during the first half of the Tribulation can only be inseparably connected with the conversion of the 144,000. How else could they have heard the message? There is really no other way. And, beyond that, proclaiming the message to 144,000 Jews who would respond, be sealed by God, and then minister to the nations of the earth during the last half of the Tribulation will probably be *the central purpose* for the ministry of the two witnesses during the first half of the Tribulation.

In this respect, the two witnesses would be seen finishing their testimony when the last of the 144,000 respond to the message. And, at this time, the woman, Israel, would be full-term in her gestation period, giving birth to the man-child, the 144,000.

## 2) Sealing, Ministry of the 144,000

There are three places in the New Testament, with a basis in the Old Testament, where there is a birth in connection with Israel, resulting in a worldwide ministry. And these places have to do with the 144,000 during the Tribulation.

A more specific Old Testament basis for that seen in the New Testament is Isa. 66:7, 8:

“Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man child.

Who hath heard such a thing? Who hath seen such things? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? Or shall a nation be born at once? For as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children.”

Three places where this subject is dealt with after this same fashion in the New Testament can be found in the Olivet Discourse accounts of Matthew and Mark (Matt. 24; Mark 13) and in the section under discussion in the Book of Revelation. In all three of these sections of Scripture, Israel is seen as a woman experiencing birth pangs, there is then a birth, and there is subsequently a worldwide proclamation of the gospel message.

The Isaiah passage previously quoted (Isa. 66:7, 8) refers to future times when Israel will *both give birth and experience birth*.

Israel will first deliver a “man-child”; then, the nation itself will be “born at once.” The “travail” and “pain” associated with birth in these verses in Isaiah though are connected only with the birth of *the nation itself*, not with *the birth of the man-child*. “Before she [Israel] travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man-child” (v. 7). The emphasis in these verses is upon *the birth of the nation* rather than the man-child (anticipating the Messianic Era), with the “travail” and “pain” so associated.

As in Isa. 66:7, 8, both Matthew’s and Mark’s Olivet Discourse accounts present *Israel in travail*. However, unlike the Isaiah passage, Israel’s travail in these two gospel accounts is seen connected with *a bringing forth of the man-child, the 144,000*. Both gospel accounts deal with the Jewish people during the Tribulation, with an emphasis on events beginning near or at the mid-point of the Tribulation and continuing throughout the last half (which is the emphasis seen in the Book of Revelation as well). And both gospel accounts lead into Christ’s return at the end of the Tribulation, as does the Book of Revelation. Thus, Israel’s travail from Isa. 66:7, having to do with the entire nation, would be alluded to in all three books, though not dealt with directly.

In the two gospel accounts, the word in the Greek text translated “sorrows” (Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:8) is the word having to do with *travail* or *birth pangs*. “Sorrows” is a translation of the Greek word *odin*, and it is really not a good translation as we understand words today. *Odin* has to do with the “travail” which a woman undergoes as she endures a time of labor immediately preceding the birth of a child; and the word “sorrows” carries too broad of a meaning in this respect. *Odin* could be better translated “birth pangs” or “travail.” The reference is to Israel in this condition during the first part of the Tribulation.

Then, Rev. 12:1-5 presents the same picture concerning Israel in *travail* (the word “travailing” in v. 2 is a translation of the Greek word *odino*, a cognate form of *odin*, meaning the same thing). In these verses, as in the gospel accounts, the birth in view is that of the “man-child.” And Israel is seen crying out while travailing in pain, awaiting the birth of this child.

And the worldwide proclamation of the gospel message during

the Tribulation is seen in all three New Testament books which depict Israel in travail.

In Matthew and Mark this message is referred to following the verses having to do with Israel in travail. In Luke's account of the Olivet Discourse, neither Israel's travail nor the message is mentioned. The two are inseparably tied together, and the inclusion or absence of one demands the inclusion or absence of the other.

Note Matthew's and Mark's accounts:

"All these are the beginning of sorrows ['birth pangs,' 'travail']...

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matt. 24:8, 14).

"...these are the beginnings of sorrows ['birth pangs,' 'travail']...

And this gospel must first be published among all nations" (Mark 13:8b, 10).

Then in the Book of Revelation this same thing is seen in connection with the 144,000, in Rev. 14:1-6. An angel appears, in possession of the gospel message (v. 6), immediately after certain things are stated about the 144,000 (vv. 1-5).

"And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" (v. 6).

Angels are seen carrying out various tasks over and over in the Book of Revelation, and an angel appearing in possession of the gospel message is one such occasion. But it is evident from the context and related Scripture that this angel is *not* the one who proclaims the message. Rather, this angel, in possession of the gospel message, makes an announcement to all that dwell on the earth (v. 7); and it is evident that this announcement is *not* the gospel message. This angel's announcement is *one of impending judgment* (not good news, not the gospel), along with *a call to recognize and give proper honor and reverence to the one true and living God.*

The proclamation of the gospel is a task committed to *man*, not to angels. And it is evident from the context and related Scripture that the gospel message, in possession of this angel, will be carried worldwide, *not by the angel in verse six, but by the 144,000 in verses one through five.*

(Only a limited number of things which Scripture reveals about the 144,000 have been discussed in this chapter. Other things on the subject is dealt with in later chapters in this book, particularly in Chapters XX, XXI, XVI.)

### Souls Clothed, How Long...

A question often asked is addressed in a somewhat indirect manner through that revealed when the fifth seal is broken. Do those who have died possess *bodies* of some type prior to the future resurrection? Note that those who had been slain in this passage — the souls under the altar — were provided with “white robes” to wear (6:11a; cf. 7:9), which would clearly indicate that they possessed a *bodily form* during the time between death and resurrection.

These individuals are seen crying out unto the Lord in “a loud voice,” asking how much longer existing conditions upon the earth were going to be allowed to continue. And they were told to rest “for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled” (v. 6:11b).

God works *at set times, with set patterns, in set ways, using set methods, etc.* Often, things seemingly go unchecked until a particular set time arrives. But when God’s set time arrives, *things change, often quite rapidly.* This is something seen over and over in Scripture (e.g., Matt. 24:42-51; Luke 17:26-30; John 2:4; 12:23; Rev. 14:7, 15).

The people of God, relative to these matters, are to simply *remain faithful, bide their time, and wait upon the Lord.* He will take care of matters in due time, *at an unchangeable previously set time.*

