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Dear Friend:

What are the "souls under the altar" mentioned in Revelation 6:9?

In Revelation 6:9-11 is a description of the fifth seal. When Jesus Christ, who is the Revelator (John is not the revelator), opened the seal, the apostle saw in heaven an altar under which were the souls of people who had been slain. They cried to God, asking Him how long it would be until He would judge the world. Many claim that these verses prove the "immortality of the soul." But do they?

Remember, if one part of this description is literal, then it all must be literal. IF there are souls in heaven, then where would they be in heaven? Notice what John says, "I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain." Where are the souls? UNDER THE ALTAR! This could not be literally true as those who teach the "immortality of the soul" admit. The entire description is actually symbolic.

None of the seven seals could be literal pictures of conditions in heaven. John saw in vision a book or scroll bound with seven seals (ch. 5:1) which only Jesus was worthy to open. As each seal was removed, John saw in vision in heaven a picture of conditions described in the book which are to take place on the earth.

The BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION, given by Jesus Himself, of the events described on the scroll under the seals, is found in Matthew 24. The description of the fifth seal is in Matthew 24:9-28. It is symbolic of the tribulation!

Notice that the souls John saw were slain for the Word of God and for their testimony, an exact description of the tribulation! In Revelation 12:17, the Word of God and the testimony are defined as the keeping of the commandments and belief in the Gospel of the Kingdom, which is the message that Jesus testified. The souls which John saw were not immortal entities. The Bible definition for soul is a living, physical creature whether animal or man (Gen. 2:7). The apostle saw in vision the souls or bodies of the martyred saints who were in vision crying out to God, just as Abel's blood cried out to God although he was dead (Gen. 4:10).

The tribulation came on the saints once, during the Middle Ages, and it will come again. The souls that were slain were told to "rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled." These two martyrdoms are also mentioned in Revelation 12, verses 6 and 14.

Those who died in the Middle Ages were symbolically given white robes to show that they possessed the righteousness of saints (Rev. 19:8). And righteousness is described in Psalm 119:172 as keeping the commandments -- the exact thing for which the Devil persecutes the Church.

But why were the souls seen in vision under the altar in heaven, though they were actually buried on the earth? This altar, mentioned also in Revelation 8:3, is the heavenly counterpart of the altar of incense which was in the holy of holies (Heb. 9:4). The altar of incense was an altar for prayer, of which incense was a symbol. The saints are pictured under the altar as a symbol of their prayers to God, which they offered when they yet lived, that He might judge the earth in righteousness and avenge them. The entire description is picturing the coming final tribulation.

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