

What about...Revelation 6:9-11?

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. 10 They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” 11 Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.
Revelation 6:9-11 (NIV)

The time period of the events in these verses is definitely before the Lord returns to raise the dead, judge the world, destroy the wicked with fire and reward the righteous because there are still believers on the earth suffering persecution and death. So do these verses indicate that souls of people go to heaven after they die and that they receive their reward in heaven before the Lord returns?

Consider first that this is a very specific group. According to the meaning of the Greek word translated as “slain” in verse nine, these are believers who were “violently killed” or “slaughtered”. These are not all the believers who have died throughout the ages. Notice that these souls are under the altar. If these souls have gone to heaven, underneath the altar seems like a very strange place to be, if taken literally.

The Book of Revelation is often highly symbolic; so it is important to try to understand the symbolism first. The altar in the earthly temple used by the Jews was patterned after an altar in the heavenly temple or heaven itself [see [Hebrews 9:23-25](#)]. Blood from animal sacrifices soaked into the ground around the earthly altar when it was poured around its base. [see [verses describing this practice](#)] Under the heavenly altar are the souls of those whose blood was spilled as they sacrificed their lives for their beliefs. They cry out for vengeance. Does the visual formed by this seem familiar? It should be for those who've read the story of Cain and Able. It was Abel's blood that the Lord described as crying out to him (probably for vengeance or justice) from the ground [see [Genesis 4:10](#)] after Cain killed him. So the symbolic picture in the book of Revelation is

the souls of these slain believers whose blood was spilled, cry out for vengeance from under the heavenly altar...the same place the blood of animal sacrifices soaked into when it was poured at the base of the earthly altar. Does this really sound like this group has made it into heaven? Or does it sound more like God views the blood of these believers as a heavenly sacrifice, crying out for him to avenge?

Well, do these verses at least indicate the souls of the righteous go to heaven? I believe that's also hard to establish not just because of the limited group and the symbolism, but because the Greek word for "souls" in verse nine can also be translated "lives" and by extension, "persons"; thereby having nothing to do with a disembodied soul or soul without a body. What about each of the slain being given a white robe; doesn't that mean that they were alive or that they received a reward? Remember we are dealing with symbolism. In Revelation 19:8 the bride of Christ was given fine linen, bright and clean. This is not literal, but as the last part of verse eight explains, it represents their righteous acts. [see [Revelation 19:7,8](#)] Death does not affect the righteous acts done during life. The slain of Revelation six would still have their righteous acts (or their white robes) even if they were dead.