

Who can Stand?

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Preacher: Peter Young

[0 : 00] Let's pray. Lord God, our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We ask that now as we look into it, that you will speak to us and that we will honour you by living according to your word in response to our hearing.

So in all things, we lean on you and we look to you. By your spirit guide us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. You will see in your handout an outline.

You may want to do that. We're going to be roaring through two chapters of Revelation. So strap yourselves in.

But who can stand? Standing is really difficult. For my father, aged 96, gravity alone is making things increasingly difficult.

[1 : 22] He finds it difficult to stand. But everyone has their tipping point, so to speak. Add a strong wind.

A sloping surface. A pair of roller skates. A blindfold. Something to trip over in the dark that somebody who will remain nameless has left there.

And all of us would find ourselves on our backsides sooner or later. What we're going to look at today is standing.

But standing metaphorically, as we will see. Surviving in the face of the most, the greatest of all imaginable hazards.

Well, let's start where we left off last week in Revelation.

[2 : 23] You'll remember that chapter 5 ends with the scroll of history in the hands of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

Who was the only one worthy, only one found worthy to open its seals. And so, when we start chapter 6, we see the start of the opening of these seals.

The opening of the seals of the scroll of God's history takes a pattern that will become very familiar to us as we go through Revelation.

A series, the first six of the series, followed by an interlude, and then the seventh, which usually introduces the next series of seven.

So, in chapter 6, we have the opening of the first six seals. And then an interlude in chapter 7.

[3 : 28] Now, since we've read chapter 6, I'm going to skip fairly quickly through that, and we'll spend more time on chapter 7. The opening of the seventh seal doesn't take place until chapter 8, so you're going to have to come back next week to find out about that.

But there's plenty in these chapters, so don't worry. Open your Bibles and let's go. So, the opening of each of these seals sets in motion a set of events that are going to happen.

So, the opening of the first four seals lets loose four horsemen, what's sometimes called the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

And these four are described, and somebody's tried to illustrate them.

But the events of these four horsemen aren't meant to be sequential, one after the other, but four aspects of the events of history.

[4 : 48] And as the seals are opened, the horses and their riders, each representing a different aspect of disaster and mayhem, it seems, is unleashed on the world.

So, we have the first of these seals. The white horse is released with its bow-bearing rider in verse 2, representing conquest and war.

And then we have the red horse with its rider having a sword of slaughter appear in verses 3 and 4. And the restraints of evil and slaughter are released.

A picture of war and slaughter in these first two horses. And then the black horse of famine and starvation appears in verses 5 and 6.

Its rider bringing in the scarcity and hardship and inequity that war and slaughter would entail.

[6 : 01] And you get the picture of a siege where inflation is at such a level that there's not enough to feed people no matter how hard they work. And yet, somehow, there's unfairness as well with the wine and the oil still being exempt from that inflation, it seems.

And the fourth horse is a sickly grey-green colour, literally chloros, the colour of chlorine.

And this horse carries death and Hades. And we see widespread death by war, disease and wild animals.

These four present a picture of chaos, devastation, suffering and destruction. And yet, as we read it, we note that it's still controlled.

The devastating riders are only released by the hand of the lamb breaking the seal as he opens the scroll. And their power and authority is only that which is given to them.

[7 : 19] The white rider is given his crown. The red rider is given a large sword. The voice proclaiming the famine comes from the throne.

And the deadly last rider is given his power to kill. What these horses represent is all too familiar.

We just have to turn on our news feed and we see evidence of the four horsemen in action in today's world. Think Ukraine.

Think Gaza. Think Lebanon. Sudan. Myanmar. Yemen. Democratic Republic of Congo. You could name. There's conflicts going on everywhere.

And that's just now. It's been going on through history. And despite this devastation, the one on the throne and the lamb are in control.

[8 : 26] What a company.

Well, with seal five, we don't see any more horses, but rather martyrs because of the word of God and those people's faithful testimony.

They've been killed for their faith. And they lament with the common cry of the psalms, which we sang just a few minutes ago. How long? How long before unbelief is judged?

And while they are given the white robe and pure robes of righteousness, they are told, not yet.

See, the thing is that God's people are not immune from suffering. And if anything, there's more.

[9 : 48] Because not only do they have to endure all of the horsemen and what have you, they are killed or they suffer because of their faith.

But you see, for Christian people, it's also better or easier or it's alleviated in some way because there's hope.

There's hope that justice is coming. We can look forward to a day when the evil of the earth will be judged.

We who have faith in Jesus, the lamb of revelation, know that he is in control and that he will one day come to judge.

Even though horrible things are happening in our world. And with the opening of the sixth seal in verse 12 of chapter 6, we have an account of that coming judgment.

[10 : 57] And that day is described in terms of cataclysmic upheaval of the natural and the supernatural order.

The sky turns black. The moon goes red. The stars fall. The heavens are rolled up. The mountains and the islands are all shuffled about. And it's clear that this is the sort of upheaval that only God can do.

These are all things that are under God, that are made by God. And this is what it looks like when God is up and about and judging.

And it is terrifying. Verse 15 makes it very clear.

The kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty and everyone else both slave and free hid in caves among the rocks of the mountains. They called on the mountains of the rocks, fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the lamb.

[12 : 11] For the great day of their wrath has come and who can withstand it? The most powerful people on earth, kings and princes, the heads of armies, the richest people of the world, everyone with power, any celebrity, anyone important, along with everyone else who isn't, right in and down to the most insignificant slave, all run and try to hide.

They would rather have mountains fall on them than face the wrath of the lamb. Now, you can call lambs all sorts of things.

But creatures of terrifying wrath, they are not. A lamb is a small, seemingly harmless creature. And it's almost mocking. All these great and mighty people are the ones afraid of the wrath of a lamb. But of course, he's no ordinary lamb.

This is the lamb. The lion of the tribe of Judah. The one who was slain. The one who is worthy to open the scrolls. Who sits on the throne of heaven.

[13:32] And who is worshipped by every living creature. His wrath induces terror. Now, some may object to this vision of Jesus as a wrathful judge.

They would prefer a Jesus who's only warm and cuddly, seeing wrath as unnecessarily harsh and unloving. But you see, that sort of thinking depends on a reduced understanding of who God is. And a reduced understanding of what sin is. God is indeed loving. Last week in our Thanksgiving service, we concentrated on a verse that told us that his love endures forever.

He's always loving. But he is also holy. And wrath, you see, is the response of holiness to evil. Wrath is God's response. God's holy response to evil. The evil one, Satan, would love to get rid of the notion of wrath.

[15:01] His very first lie to humanity, way back in Genesis, the other end of the Bible, was that there wouldn't be any consequences of their sin.

If you eat of this tree that God told you not to, you won't really die. It's not really going to be a big problem for you. In fact, it's going to be great.

You'll know. You'll be in on the secrets of God. God won't judge.

There are no real consequences. God's only loving, a benign, avuncular old softy. Everyone will be all right.

You don't have to worry about sin. That's the lie. And we continue to lap it up. Because that's what we want to hear. But actually, wrath is coming.

[16:12] And as verse 17 of chapter 6 puts it, who can withstand it? Who can stand in the face of the wrath of the Lamb?

And with that question, we are swept into the interlude of chapter 7.

Now, what we have to understand about this chapter is that the order of chapters 6 and 7 is, again, not chronological.

That is, they don't... Chapter 7 doesn't follow after chapter 6. It's rather another side of the same story, looking at it from another angle, as it were.

And after this, I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree yet.

[17:18] We saw in our Old Testament reading from Zechariah 6 that this image of four riders and their four horses and their riders, and in that chapter, they are described as the four spirits or four winds.

And I think this is what John is alluding to here. The angels are holding back the four winds.

They're holding back the disaster described in the first part of chapter 6 that's brought on by those four horsemen. And they're holding it back for a reason.

Because then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he called out in a loud voice to the four angels who'd been given power to harm the land and the sea, don't harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.

The calamities on the earth are being held back until the servants of God can be marked with God's mark. When we're in Nigeria, one of the things, and this gentleman demonstrates it, people had on their faces very often scars.

[19:00] And these were tribal markings. You'll see this gentleman has three stripes on each cheek. And these were placed or cut into the face of an infant very early in their life by the mother.

And ash is rubbed into the wound so that it scars and it makes those black scars. Now, each tribe has a different pattern.

This man, I think, is a... I'm not sure. He comes from a group of tribes, three tribes called the Chala tribes. But anyhow, you know when you see those markings that that's the tribe that he's from.

Originally, the story goes that these tribes, these marks started during the time of the transatlantic slave trade because these were the people who were stolen and sold across the ocean.

And the mothers would make scars on the faces of their children so that they would be less attractive when the slave kidnapers came.

[20 : 30] They were a protection for that child as well as an identifier of where they belong. And so it is with the mark of God.

It's a protection and a sign of who we belong to. In the midst of the turmoil and suffering and grief and mayhem, God's people, the servants of our God, are indelibly marked and protected.

Just like you can't ever get rid of the tribal markings once they are there. The seal of God is once for all.

Bad things may come. We may suffer. But the evil one cannot touch the people of God, sealed with God's tribal marking.

The mark of God is one of ownership and belonging, but it's also one of protection. And we see that mark of God. I mean, throughout the Old Testament, we have pictures of marks that protect God's people.

[21 : 56] Think of the Passover, when the mark above the door signified that this is a house of God's people. We have a similar story in Ezekiel 9, if you care to look it up sometime.

But this is the answer to chapter 6, chapter 6's final terrible question.

Who can withstand the wrath of the Lamb? Well, it's those who are sealed with God's mark. So there is protection, security and belonging for the ones with God's ownership mark.

But who are they? Am I included? Well, John's vision had an answer to that question.

Because in verse 4, John hears the number of those who are marked.

[23 : 02] 144,000. Now, if we're talking about the whole of the world, in all of history, 144,000 is a very small number.

But as we have seen throughout, as we've gone through Revelation, numbers are often and usually symbolic.

And this one is no exception. See, 144,000 isn't a literal number, despite what some people may want to tell you.

It symbolizes the completeness of God's people, which is shown in verses 6 to 8. The 12 tribes of Israel, 12,000 from each of the 12, 12 squared and multiplied out by 1,000.

It shows the perfect number of God's people, the true Israel of God. No one will be left out. It is complete. The number of those sealed is rounded out by everyone who is supposed to be there.

[24 : 25] God's people will be complete. Another way that things are done in Revelation is that very often John hears one thing and then sees something that looks different, but they're the same thing.

For example, in chapter 5, which we looked at last week, John heard about the lion of the tribe of Judah, but when he looked, it was a lamb who was slain.

They were the same person, Jesus. Two images that express different truths about the same person.

And so it is here. You see, he hears the number 144,000, but when he looks, there's a multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and before the lamb.

There are, again, two images that express different truths about the same people.

[25 : 57] In verse 4, with the 144,000, what was emphasized was the completeness of God's people. And here, in this verse, what is emphasized is the inclusiveness and the vastness of God's people.

They are uncountable, a heaving, diverse, multilingual, multicultural, intertribal mass of people.

Now, the MCG holds 100,000, and that's how we measure a large number of people, isn't it?

One MCG's worth. Well, imagine 100 MCG's worth. That's a lot more people.

Imagine 1,000. This is talking about more than that. In fact, we can't tell how many 1,000 MCG's there were.

[27 : 08] But God does. God knows their number. The 144,000 number tells us that. Everyone who should be there is there.

God knows each one. We can't count them. A multitude that nobody could count, he couldn't see the end of them. Everyone who should be there will be there.

And yet, what a picture of this great mass of people. And not only is the number and the variety of the multitude impressive, but also what they were wearing and what they were doing.

We've already come across white robes before, haven't we? Do you remember way back in chapter 3 when life was simpler?

We were talking about the church in Sardis. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white.

[28 : 30] And I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. God promised white robes, signifying righteous people, to the ones who are victorious in Christ.

And here he is, keeping that promise. His people get white robes. Now, as we see later on in chapter 7, in verse 14, they are white because they are washed in the blood of the Lamb. They are washed once for all in the blood of the Lamb, and that makes them pure and holy. We don't usually wash things in blood, but this is special.

This is an image of the death of Jesus that makes people righteous. Once for all time, through the spilled blood of Jesus, when we have faith in him.

And what are these people doing, these made righteous people? Well, they are all crying out in praise to God and to the Lamb.

[30 : 04] They cried out in a loud voice. Now, you remember, this is a huge number of people all speaking all sorts of different language. How John knew that that's what they were saying, we don't know.

But they were all saying, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. And when you think about it, this is what the Emperor would have wanted said about him.

He's our Saviour. He's the one we look to. He's the one we rely on. It's what every tyrant since then, right up to today, wants to have said about them.

But it's only true of God and of the Lamb. salvation belongs to our God and only our God.

He is our Saviour. But it's not only them who are praising God. Angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures and they fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God saying, Amen.

[31 : 33] Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen. I always want, we used to sing a song using those words in Nigeria.

I won't sing it now but it always makes me want to break out into this song because what it's saying though is not just a bit of praise, a bit of glory, a bit of wisdom.

Actually, it actually says the praise and the glory and the wisdom and the thanks and the power and the honour and strength, the strength belong to God.

If there's any of these things, it all belongs to God. If there is any praise, it belongs to God. If there is any glory, it is God's.

If there is any wisdom, if there is any thanks and honour and power and strength, it's God's. Do you see what they're saying? He is everything that's worth talking about.

[32 : 54] And as we have seen, in case there's any doubt, the white-robed ones are identified again. One of the elders asked me, these in the white robes, who are they?

And where did they come from? Sort of a trick question because John says, well, sir, you know.

And he said, well, these are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation. They've washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

they're the ones who've come out of the tribulation, the turmoil of this life with all this nasty horsemen and the horrendous suffering and all that stuff.

And the white robes, the righteousness comes from the blood of the Lamb. There's no doubt what we are looking at here.

[33 : 54] We are talking about all people from all time who put their trust in the Lord Jesus and we are told that it's going to be from every tribe and every nation, every people group on this planet will be represented before that throne.

What a magnificent story. And look where faith in Jesus gets us.

Verses 15 to 17 is a description of heaven and we're given seven descriptions of what heaven's like.

Now, remember numbers are important, seven being that perfect, a seven-fold description of what heaven is like. And all of these images are actually ones that are brought from the Old Testament prophets, especially those prophets who talked about the end of the exile.

The implication is that exile ends within Jesus. We come back to God in Jesus.

[35 : 17] Jesus. And here are the seven eternal benefits of the redeemed people of God. It's there on your handout if you want to look at it. They're before the throne of God.

They serve him day and night in his temple and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They're given privilege before the throne.

They get to serve him day and night and they are sheltered by God. They are protected. On to verse 16. They never hunger.

Never again will they hunger. Never again will they thirst. They're not burned. They're covered. The sun will not beat down on them nor any scorching heat.

They're protected you see. And verse 17. The lamb is at the center of the throne and he will be their shepherd. And they're shepherded to springs of living water.

[36 : 25] Refreshment forever by the lamb. Led there by the lamb and every tear is wiped away. What a picture of comfort.

It's a comprehensive and perfect that is sevenfold picture of peace, contentment, well-being, comfort and praise.

There'll be things to do. We won't get bored. We'll serve him day and night. But it won't be boring or burdensome and taxing and wearisome as sometimes the work we do here is.

It's going to be a wonderful, amazing thing to look forward to. We're given this little picture into heaven. And what a picture, what an inviting prospect. So, in conclusion, we can expect hard, even terrifying things in this life.

Big global events and little local ones will contain elements of conquest, war, hardship and inequity, afflictions and even death.

[37 : 44] And this has been true since the death and resurrection of Jesus when he, the lamb, first started opening the seals. And it will affect Christian people.

We will and do cry out to the Lord, how long? God's love. But we wait in hope for the final return of the lamb and the judgment that he brings.

We who are in Christ are protected in the things that really matter. We're sealed with God's mark.

We're given his tribal marking, indelibly part of God's multicultural people, saved and washed and to praise him forever.

And on that great and terrible day when he does come back, it will be catastrophic for those who have rejected him, for those who have neglected him, those who have ignored him or believe the lie that there will be no consequences for sin.

You'd notice that in chapter seven, the judgment day of Jesus isn't even mentioned. You see, God's people are already made righteous with perfectly whitewashed robes.

[39 : 14] There's nothing to fear. The verdict is already in and it's already been made in our favor because of Jesus, because he's washed our robes for us.

The wrath of the Lamb which causes the mightiest king, the richest celebrity and the most powerful tyrant along with everyone else to quail and say, who can stand?

That wrath is turned aside from those whose robes have been washed, who bear the mark of Jesus. So, in answer to the question who can stand, the answer is those who have faith in Jesus.

For those who don't, there's a particular expression of woe in the Hausa language that we learned in Africa.

Wayo! It says it all. You hear a little child who's being punished by his parents. Wayo! That's what it'll be if we haven't accepted Jesus.

[40 : 43] The opportunity is now to accept him, to believe, to turn to him in repentance and faith.

Let's pray. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Amen. praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever.

Amen, Lord. Amen.