

Who Can Stand?

Revelation 6:12-7:17

Imagine that someone came to you with some secret information concerning the stock market. Maybe he's found out a certain company is coming out with a revolutionary new product and their stock is going to skyrocket in value or, conversely, there's going to be a devastating market crash in two months, and you need to get out now. Of course, people are saying stuff like this all the time. But what if he actually knew – he had inside information that was simply, incontrovertibly true? What he said was going to happen. Would you act?

Some of you would. Others would be skeptical and assume that things will go on basically the way they always have, and you wouldn't do anything. However, since what this person told you was actually the truth, whatever choice you make will have direct and lasting impact on your financial future. You will either be fabulously rich or lose everything.

It's the same in spiritual things. What we have in the Bible, and in particular, in the book of Revelation, is "the inside scoop" concerning the history of the world. Jesus, the Lord and Ruler of history, is telling us what will happen. And it really will happen. We know it will happen because the One who tells us is the One who will make it happen! Jesus isn't simply prophesying what will take place – he is telling us what he himself is going to do. What we do with this information will determine our eternal misery or eternal bliss.

Our text takes place in the context of a vision in which John sees Jesus opening the 7 seals, which sealed the scroll of God's purposes in human history. Only Jesus is able to do this, for only he is worthy. And as Jesus breaks open the seals, we see God's purposes for this world. The first 4 seals revealed that these last days will be characterized by suffering and death. The 5th seal revealed the martyred saints in heaven – they are in the presence of God, enjoying the sabbath rest of heaven, but yearning for God's purposes to be fully accomplished. The question they ask is "How long?" The answer they were given was "Yet a little while," until the number of martyrs is completed. Human history will go on until all of God's elect children are gathered in, and all his purposes for this world are accomplished. This world will not end a minute before or after God's purposes are fulfilled. But it will end.

And that's the point of the 6th seal. In the breaking of the 6th seal we are brought to the end of human history, the end of this world.

I. The Plight of the Lost

In symbolic language, we are given a preview of the last day. Jesus shows us what it will be like and how it will be experienced.

In verses 12-14 we are told of a great earthquake which shatters all of creation. The people of Asia Minor were well acquainted with the devastating power of earthquakes. But this earthquake will not simply decimate the earth – it will also destroy the heavens. The sun will be blackened, it will go out. The moon will become like blood, and stars will fall to the earth like figs falling to the ground in a gale. The sun, moon, and stars are the markers of time – days, months, and seasons – and now time will be no more. This is the threshold of eternity, and the created world crumbles.

There is a scene in the movie *Inception* where the imagined city, created in the mind of Leonardo DiCaprio, begins to crumble and disintegrate. The Bible seems to say that on the last day, creation itself will experience a radical undoing. Peter says it will be burned with fire. John sees a great earthquake. These are figurative pictures of a coming disintegration as the living God appears in all his glory and might to judge the world. All that has been tainted and touched by sin will be shaken, even the mountains and islands.

The experience will be utterly terrifying for the citizens of this world.

Rev. 6:15-17 *Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"*

On that day all social distinctions will vanish. The kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and powerful – they will join the mass of humanity, slave and free, in a desperate attempt to avoid the wrath of God. The President of the United States, Hollywood celebrities, star athletes and Wall Street titans will join every other unconverted man and woman and child, slave and free, in a terrified effort to flee judgment.

In an earthquake, the natural instinct is to run from falling buildings in an effort to save yourself. But in this great earthquake, people will run to the falling rocks and mountains, seeking to escape the penetrating gaze of King Jesus. They will prefer being crushed by rocks to facing the wrath of the Lamb. But death will not be able to hide them. On the last day, even the dead shall be raised in order to stand before the judgement of the Lamb.

This will happen. No wealth, position, power, religion, or moral principles will provide protection for a guilty soul on that day. Not even death will be able to hide the lost.

The terrifying question of this perishing world will be "Who can stand?". Who can stand when the sky is falling, and the mountains are being removed from their place? Who can exist in the face of the glory of him who is seated on the throne, as he comes to judge the living and the dead? Who can stand?

It may be a question you have asked yourself. Will I be able to stand on that great day of judgement? When the sky is rolled back, and King Jesus appears to judge the living and the dead, will I respond with joy or with terror? Will I be able to stand? How could a sinner like myself possibly stand with joy when Christ appears to judge the world?

In a direct response to that question, there is a magnificent heavenly response. There is an interlude in the breaking of the seals. It's as though Jesus interrupts the regular scheduled program to make a special announcement. There is something Jesus wants us to hear. He wants his church, his bride, to see the sovereign, sealing, saving acts of their God and King.

II. The Sealing of the Saints

In chapter 7, in stark contrast to the terror and wrath which will be the experience of the lost, there is a message of divine protection, security, and comfort for those who belong to Christ. There are two visions here, both making the same point:

***Rev. 7:1–3** After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."*

The vision reminds us that before God judges, he rescues. There is a prior, saving act of God before the act of justice.

In the vision, the four angels of judgement are ready. The four horsemen who have been given authority to carry out a campaign of destruction and death are poised. But before they are released, another angel, coming from the east, calls out with a loud voice, "Wait! Do no harm until we have sealed the servants of God on their foreheads."

God has an elect people, chosen from before the foundation of the world. He knows those who are his, and he acts to seal them before the judgement falls.

What is the seal? The seal is the name of Christ.

Rev. 14:1 *Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.*

Those who belong to Christ, by the electing will of God, are sealed to Christ. Jesus puts his name on them, signifying that these belong to him. They are his own possession.

The seal does not only state ownership, but also divine power and protection. Dennis Johnson notes that in Revelation 13 we will see a satanic imitation of this seal of God in the "mark of the beast." The mark of the beast is a mark of ownership. But the "seal of God" describes both ownership and sovereign, protective power. Those who are sealed will not be lost because they cannot be lost! They are sheltered by the power of God. They shall be protected from the wrath to come.

We have a vivid example of this in the OT Passover. God told the Israelites that he was going to bring judgement upon Egypt. He was going to kill every firstborn child and animal in the land. But if they would mark their doorpost with the blood of a sacrificed lamb, the angel of death would pass over them. That blood would seal them as belonging to God and would protect them from the coming judgement.

Jesus wants his church to know that, as they live in a world under divine judgement, they have been sealed unto God. Consequently, no matter how fierce the coming judgment on this world, it will not harm them. They may experience temporary suffering; they may be called to endure illness and wars and famines. But there is no wrath in it, no judgement in it, and no eternal harm in it.

Whatever suffering the Lord calls us to endure – and he will – Jesus wants you to know that he has placed his name on you. He has claimed you as his very own. He received the wrath and judgment we deserved so that we can know, with certainty, that there is now no condemnation for those who are in him. You have been sealed with his name.

In verses 5-8 John recounts the number of the sealed from "every tribe of the sons of Israel." The list is symbolic, representing the church. For instance, the list doesn't include every tribe of Israel. Dan is left out, most likely because of the idolatry associated with the tribe of Dan. It is a figurative list, symbolizing the people of God. And in his letter to the Galatians, Paul reminds the New Testament church that those who have faith in Christ are the true descendants of Abraham, and the church is the true Israel of God.

The number is also symbolic. The number of the sealed is 144,000. This is clearly not a literal number, despite what your neighborhood Jehovah's Witness might say. It is 12 x 12 – the number of the church of all ages x 1000, the number of multitudes. And that's precisely what John sees in the following vision, the vision of heaven.

III. The Great Multitude in Heaven

Rev. 7:9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands...

A. Their Posture

John sees the elect of God, the church of Jesus Christ – people from every nation and tribe and peoples and language. Notice what they are doing! They are standing! This is Jesus' answer to the question of the world. Who can stand? These can stand! They are not swept away by the flood of divine wrath. They are not terrified at the coming of King Jesus! Instead of screaming with terror they are singing with exaltation! In glorious, thunderous unison, they cry out with a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.”

Salvation belongs to God! It is from him and through him and to him! The story of the saints is not their faith, but the faithful God and Savior.

This is the truth that undergirds and empowers perseverance, peace, and joy of God's people here on earth. Remember, Jesus is giving this vision to John, and commanded John to write these things down and give this vision to the church. Jesus wants us to know these things! To see things the way they really are. To see the incredible truth of Christ's utter sovereignty over this world, for the sake of his people! King Jesus wants us to experience the peace and comfort that comes from a rock-solid conviction about our eternal security in the shelter of his mighty arms.

And so the vision ends with a scene of the saints in heaven. The elder tells them who they are and shows them their eternal bliss.

B. Their Identity

- They have suffered. **“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.”** The salvation of God doesn't rescue us from trials and pain – it calls us to them. As Paul reminds the suffering believers in Philippi:

Phil. 1:29 *For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake...*

Dennis Johnson: "The innumerable assembly of nations shows the victorious church in heaven, emerging triumphant from tribulation not through a painless rapture but through a faithful death."

- They have believed the gospel and received what it promises. **"They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb."** They cast themselves, as needy sinners, upon the atoning sacrifice of Christ. They acknowledged, freely and without pretense, that their robes were stained and polluted by sin. They confessed that they could not make those robes clean by their own efforts or intentions. They believed the gospel, the good news that God has made a way, in the death of his Son, for sinners to be washed clean.

*There is a fountain, filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins.
And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.*

C. Their Joy

Presence: They serve and are sheltered in the presence of God.

Rev. 7:15 *Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.*

They are free from all lack, all want, all suffering of every kind.

Provision:

Rev. 7:16 *They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.*

Peace:

Rev. 7:17 *For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

Conclusion

What a dramatic, incredible contrast between the perishing and the redeemed! Every single one of us will be in one of these two groups on that last day. There is not another option. Everyone will cry out – some in sheer terror, others with ecstasy and joy! Which group will you be in?

It all depends on what you do in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To those of you who are unconverted, let me appeal to you. God has announced that the end of the world is going to come. You are going to experience the coming of Jesus Christ. Death will not be able to hide you. Nor will anything else in all creation. But God the Father has provided a way for you to stand on that great day. He sent his only Son to live the obedient and loving life we were supposed to lead. And then he sacrificed his Son on a cross, where his Son bore the guilt of all our failures and wickedness and sin. And all those who call on his name, confessing their sin and trusting in Christ Jesus alone for cleansing from sin, will be saved.

To the church: Jesus has given us this vision for our comfort and joy. We experience the suffering of this broken world in many ways. We may have to experience great tribulation in days to come. There may well be real persecution in our lifetime. We have millions of brothers and sisters around the world experiencing it right now. There is no reason for us to believe that God will not invite us to the same. Real loss, deep suffering.

It is natural for us to ask, "Will we be able to stand?". When confessing Christ costs you your job – will you be able to stand? When it costs you your home, your possessions, your family – will you be able to stand? Where will we find the courage to face such trials? In the conviction that God has rescued us from the greatest trial of all, the trial of judgement. In the conviction that we belong to Jesus, the one who loved us and gave his life for us. And nothing can ever separate us from his saving power and love – not nakedness, famine, danger, or sword. Nothing. And that frees us to live with joy and faith, even in the midst of suffering and death.

I think one of the most powerful examples of this is *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom. Corrie's older sister, Betsie, was about my age when they entered Ravensbruck concentration camp. She would die there. They managed to hide a small Bible which Betsie would take up and read to the gathered women each night. Corrie writes,

"I would look about as Betsie read, watching the light leap from face to face. More than conquerors...It was not a wish. It was a fact. We knew it, we experienced it minute by minute—poor, hated, hungry. We are more than conquerors. Not "we shall be." We are! Life in Ravensbruck took place on two separate levels, mutually impossible. One, the observable, external life, grew every day more horrible. The other, the life we lived with God, grew daily better, truth upon truth, glory upon glory." (THP, 190)

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart – I have overcome the world. And in the world to come – this Jesus will wipe every tear from your eye and lead you into everlasting life and joy. That's the promise. Let's believe it. Amen.

