

Who Can Stand?

By Brad Allison on 7/11/2004

Scripture Reference *Revelation 6-7*

As we've been studying the book of Revelation, we have noticed how it is intended to be an unveiling of the future. In this book, Jesus reveals the future to his people. He is able to do this because he sits on the throne and is the one who holds the future in his hands. The particular form of this unveiling, as we saw last week, is in the unsealing of the scroll. This scroll describes the plan of God in which he will bring in his kingdom. Jesus alone is able to open the scroll and bring about the kingdom of God. Much of the rest of this book is a record of what the scroll of chapter 5 says, revealed to us as the seals are opened. The two chapters before us today describe the first six of the seven seals.

I need to clarify again today that Jesus' unveiling of the future does not take the form of history written before it happens. He doesn't say, "This will happen in the year 1919, and then 20 years later, there will be a great war. Begin counting the years, and before you get to 75, I will return." If you expect Jesus' revelation of the future to be that specific, you will be disappointed. What he does instead is to reveal the themes that will occur throughout the entire period between his two comings. He says that these themes will escalate until they reach a climax at the return of Jesus. Probably the best way for us to understand how Jesus reveals to us the future is simply to get started with these seven seals, and point out how they reveal the future. Instead of going through them one seal at a time, I want us to look at three summary themes that we can see in the six seals spoken of in these two chapters. The themes I want us to look at are tribulation, judgment and the vindication of Jesus.

I. Tribulation

One of the most well-known images from the book of Revelation is this section in which the first four seals are opened and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse come forth. Remember that "Apocalypse" is just another name for this book of Revelation. The first horse is a white horse, whose rider had a bow and a crown. For several reasons, I think this horse refers to the conquest of the gospel. This shows that even though all the other seals bring in times of calamity, the tribulation is not unmixed. There will also be sufficient stability in order for the gospel to go forth and conquer. I often wonder if the main reason for the relative stability of our own nation is that its churches continue to be a major source of funding the gospel conquest.

Most of the other seals, however, describe times of tribulation. The second horse is bright red, symbolizing the bloodshed this rider will bring as he takes peace from the earth. The third horse is black, which speaks of famine and shortages. A voice is heard that says, "A quart of wheat for a denarius." A quart is the amount of wheat required to sustain one person for one day and a denarius is the average wage of a worker for one day's work. Those sums don't add up, because one worker has to support more than one person.

The fourth horse is pale, the color of a corpse, because he symbolizes death. The rider of this horse was given authority over a fourth of humanity, indicating that a fourth will die from something other than old age, something like violence, famine, disease or accidents.

So the future Jesus unveils to us is one where there will be sufficient stability for the establishment of the gospel throughout the world, and much tribulation. Note, too, that the tribulation will increase as we get closer to Jesus' second coming. Over in chapter 7 he calls this final period of tribulation prior to Jesus' return "the great tribulation" (7:14). Jesus

speaks about this great tribulation in Matthew 24, where he says, “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short” (24:21-22).

I should probably say something here about the *Left Behind* series of novels, because they take a different view on this. The premise of the series is that Christians will be taken out of the world through a rapture prior to this Great Tribulation, with the result that only non-Christians will be “*left behind*.” Jesus’ words, quoted above, clearly refute such an idea, where he says that the days will be cut short for the sake of the elect. That indicates to me that God’s people will be present at this tribulation. Also, in 7:14 it says of Christians that they are those who have come out of the great tribulation. The only way to come out of something is to go through it. So, this entire period of time between the two comings of Jesus will be a time of tribulation, leading to a great tribulation. I want to pose a quick application question, and then move on because we are going to answer it later. The question is this: Can your faith withstand this kind of tribulation?

II. Judgment

The sixth seal speaks of the theme of judgment. Again, there is an escalation with this, as was the case with tribulation. This entire age is characterized by various small judgments from God, all acting as pointers to a great judgment. This great judgment will come at the end, just prior to Jesus’ return. It is described in the sixth seal. Let me point out just a few characteristics of it.

I notice first that it is accompanied by an upheaval of creation. There is a great earthquake, the darkening of the sun, the falling of the stars and the removal of mountains and stars. In light of this great judgment, there is no solid foundation on this earth. There is no bunker that will be safe on that day, no place of refuge to escape God’s judgment.

I notice too that this judgment is universal, involving everyone from the great to the small. It is inescapable, no matter how powerful and wealthy one may be. Even the kings of the earth will be subject to this judgment. They will not be able to escape it by virtue of their wealth or power. It will be unexpected, indicated by another passage that says it will be like a thief in the night (1 Thess. 5:2). Finally, it will be accompanied by complete panic and terror. There is an amazing and terrifying passage here. I don’t know about you, but one thought that is able to produce a feeling of panic within me is the thought of being buried alive. Just the thought of being deep under ground, with no space to spread out, produces in me a quickening of my breathing and my heart rate. Yet notice what our passage says. When confronted with the prospect of facing the wrath of the Lamb, many will express a preference to be buried alive by the earth. They will call 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” (6:16).

This passage helps us get perspective on our lives. We are like someone who jumps from the 50th floor of a building without a parachute. When he passes the 30th, someone shouts, “How’s it going?” And the jumper answers, “So far, so good.” As surely as the ground will come for that jumper, the judgment of God will come upon all. The question for us all is the one that is asked at the end of chapter 6: “Who can stand?” In light of God’s certain and awful judgment, who can stand? That brings us to our final point.

III. Vindication

Chapter 7 answers the question asked at the end of chapter 6. In light of the tribulation and judgment characterizing this world, who can stand? Chapter 7 says that those who have been sealed by God and who worship the Lamb are the ones who can stand. On this day of the Lord's judgment, Jesus will be vindicated as the one who alone can satisfy and thus remove the wrath of God. He is truly unique, just as he claimed when he said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Illustration: Several years ago, a team from our church went on a missions trip to Peru. While there, I discovered that Lima, Peru lies in the middle of the most arid desert in the entire world. As a matter of fact, it never rains in Lima. It is so dry that on the rare occasions when there is some precipitation in the atmosphere, it will evaporate before hitting the ground. One of the odd thoughts that struck me as I heard that was that it would be a good place for a poor roofer to do his work. If it never rains, the poor quality of his work would never be exposed. Almost any roof will do in such an environment. In the same way, prior to that great day of the Lord when judgment comes, most any religion or philosophy of life will do. But on that day, it will all be exposed as fraudulent, and only those who are covered by Jesus will be able to stand.

Who will be able to stand? Those who can say today what that vast multitude of the redeemed will say after this great judgment. "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (7:10). Since everything depends on your ability to say that now and mean it, let's look carefully at this statement. If you are going to stand on that day of judgment, there are three claims you need to be ready to make prior to such judgment. First, "salvation belongs to our God." On that day, everything else will be exposed for the fraud that it is. Only the blood of the Lamb will work in covering our sin and making us white. The central meaning of faith in Jesus is to be able to say now that salvation belongs to our God, and to no one or nothing else. I heard on the radio this week of a man who discovered on his wedding night that his wife was bald. She had been so since childhood, due to a diseased condition. The man soon divorced his wife, claiming that it was her hair that attracted him to her. Leaving aside the shallowness of this man's love for his wife, there is something tragic about the discovery that what you've been delighting in and trusting in turns out to be a fraud. Such will be the outcome upon all those who have trusted in money, intelligence, good deeds, looking good, being right, and anything else in which we fallen creatures put our confidence. But all those who have said, "Salvation belongs to our God" will marvel at the effectiveness of Jesus in bringing salvation and deliverance.

Can you say that today? Can you say "Salvation belongs to our God"? I'm not talking about merely being able to repeat those words, but about believing in your heart that your biggest need can be found in Jesus and none other. One of the most important insights you can get about yourself is to see what it is you are looking to for salvation. When you boil it all down, there are only two options—yourself or Jesus. Are you looking to something you can do or possess to make you feel like everything is okay with you, or are you looking outside of yourself to Jesus? Remember that image from Martin Luther, where he said we are like a caterpillar in a ring of fire. Our only hope for deliverance lies from above, outside ourselves.

The second thing they say is that this God who brings salvation sits on the throne. The throne is the place of all rule and authority, and what this means is that they gladly acknowledge the sovereign authority and wisdom of God and submit themselves to it. Such acknowledgement and submission shows itself in this life through patiently waiting on God and his timing.

Finally, those who will be able to stand on that day can say today that salvation belongs to the Lamb. You have perhaps learned by now that this designation of Jesus as the Lamb is going to appear frequently in this last book of the Bible. The Lamb of God served one purpose, summarized by John the Baptist when he said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Those who will be able to stand on that day of judgment are the ones who have come to see that their biggest problem is sin, and God has mercifully provided an answer for this very problem. Jesus is the Lamb who takes away the sin.

CONCLUSION:

I want to close with three applications. First, if God’s judgment is real, and if the only way to stand on the day of his judgment is through faith in Jesus, then everyone we meet will either be calling on the rocks to bury them alive, or worshipping Jesus on that day. Listen to C. S. Lewis’ well-known words on this:

It is hardly possible for [us] to think too often or too deeply about [the glory] of our neighbor. . . It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. (*The Weight of Glory*, pp. 14f.)

Secondly, if God’s judgment is real, and if that judgment has been taken care of by the Lamb of God, then there is nothing else we really need to fear. We can move out in this life full of confidence and boldness, not fearing failure. The story is told of a young executive who replaced the veteran CEO of a corporation. When the young man asked his older, wiser predecessor the secret to his success, the older man replied, “Good decisions.” The younger man said, “Fine, how do I make good decisions?” The older man replied, “Bad decisions.” We need not be paralyzed and anxious about failure because Jesus has made us secure.

Finally, let us begin the worship of the Lamb now, remembering and delighting always in the fact that he has taken our sin and removed it from us. Dr. Alexander Whyte was a 19th century Scottish preacher, who tells of another preacher who came to a fresh understanding of the Lamb of God and his sin-bearing. The two had been in a lengthy church meeting all day, and when it finally ended all the participants left except for one, an older minister who seemed to want to talk to Dr. Whyte. The man just seemed to engage in small talk, and Whyte couldn’t figure out why he didn’t leave like the others. Finally he said, seemingly in jest, “Now Dr. Whyte, what word of comfort do you have for an old sinner like me?” It was said as a joke, but Alexander Whyte said that beneath the smile, he saw great pain. It took his breath away. Here was an old man in the faith, and somehow he was unable to lay claim to the goodness and mercy of Christ. Dr. Whyte wasn’t sure what to do. He got up from his chair and walked to the man and said simply, “My God delights in showing mercy.” Not much more was said that evening and the older man left. But the next day, a note came from him saying, “Dr. Whyte, that word you gave me last night brought great hope to my soul. I was near the gates of hell, but those words brought me back to grace and mercy.”