

Who Can Stand?

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[0 : 00] Please keep open the Bibles at that page and let me pray for us. Lord God, the Almighty, we pray that you will open our eyes to see your glory tonight and to see the glory of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may be strengthened to endure with faith to our lives end and stand robed in righteousness in your presence for eternity.

This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. World War I, which many of you look as though you can remember that, and I feel that I could.

World War I was meant to be the war that ends all wars, but it didn't because it was fairly quickly followed by World War II, which was just as unsuccessful in ending all wars because ever since World War II, there has been war in our world.

There have been some wars that have come and gone between now and World War II, wars in places like Korea and Vietnam, possibly Northern Ireland, Chechnya, maybe, the Balkans, Eritrea, and yet, of course, the world is still at war.

Afghanistan and Iraq dominate our news day by day, but there remain wars, serious wars in places like Sudan, in effect in places like Zimbabwe, and even Timor is not all that settled, Israel, Palestine, Pakistan, numerous West African countries most of us have never heard of, Somalia, Burma, etc., etc.

[1 : 46] Wars all over the place. And, of course, then there's the terrorism war in places that we don't normally think about having war, like New York City, Madrid, London, Bali, Jakarta, Mumbai, Aden, other places.

And in the midst of all these wars around us, coming and going with extraordinary frequency, we may well ask, where is the Prince of Peace?

But let's add in to the mix the famines and the poverty in our world. Famine is often a result or consequence of war.

Some may remember the food rationing after the second war, for example, in Europe. But today, a result of most wars is that people hunger for food, which has become so scarce.

And well may we ask in those contexts, where is the daily bread for so many people? But they're not just man-made wars either, and they're consequences.

[2 : 51] There are natural disasters. We've been astonished in the last three or four years at the extraordinary natural devastation in our own Asia-Pacific area.

Tsunamis in two oceans now. Earthquakes in places like Indonesia, Turkey, Iran in Qom a few years ago, Sichuan province in China, Samoa, cyclones in New Orleans, Myanmar that killed perhaps a quarter of a million people, the Philippines, and numerous other natural disasters, including bushfires.

And well may we ask, where is God? But let's add into the mix again, into the mix of war and famine and natural disaster and the woes and strifes and suffering that they all cause, the dimension of persecution.

For Christians are persecuted in dozens of countries in our world, sometimes with swords, machetes or fire, but sometimes socially, economically, such as happen even in our own country.

Christians are regularly persecuted in places like Iran and Iraq, in Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Burma, India, Israel, Mexico, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Sudan, Nigeria, and the list goes on and on and on.

[4 : 16] And well may we ask, how long, O Lord? In a world full of war, of strife, of suffering, of famine, of natural disaster, and of persecution, how hard it is to stay being Christian.

how hard it is to maintain our first strong ardent love for God throughout our lives, as the ancient church of Ephesus struggled to do.

How hard it is to be faithful in the face of injustice like unjust imprisonment, as the little ancient church of Smyrna struggled to do.

How easy it is, in the midst of all this suffering, to drift into false teaching of all sorts of different types, to try and escape the suffering through Eastern mysticism, to escape the struggles of life by adopting a prosperity gospel.

Into false teaching slid the ancient little churches of Pergamum and Thyatira, for example. How easy it is, in the midst of all of this, to become spiritually dead, like the ancient struggling church of Sardis, or to be lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, just tepid, like the ancient church of Laodicea.

[5 : 51] How hard it is to stay faithful to Jesus with patient endurance, following the model of the little church of an ancient town called Philadelphia.

It's not easy staying Christian in our world. So many, tragically, drift away.

There are many whom no doubt you know, and dozens whom I've known, who've drifted away from ardent Christian faith. Some through temptations, the allurements, the enticements of our world.

Some through the wealth and complacency and the success in our world. But some disillusioned, disenchanted with suffering, with war, with famine, with strife, with poverty, with rampant evil.

How do we hold fast to faith in Jesus to our lives' end? How do we keep going as Christians, remaining faithful even unto death?

[7 : 08] This vision of the throne room of heaven, given to the Apostle John at the end of the first century, and given to us through him as we are ushered into that throne room by his recording of it, is given to us to strengthen us, teach us, encourage us, and challenge us to hold fast to our Christian faith, to our lives' end, even in the face of death.

It's to give us God's perspective on a fallen world, to fix our eyes on eternal glory. The Lion Lamb, whom we saw last week, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is worthy because he died, has come and taken from the right hand of God on the throne of the universe, a scroll, sealed with seven seals.

This book is full of sevens. In the book of Revelation, we find seven churches that I've just mentioned, seven spirits and seven lampstands, seven bowls, seven stars, seven seals, seven horns and seven eyes.

There are seven angels, seven thunders, seven heads, seven hills, seven kings and seven trumpets and 777 ways to interpret it all. It's a bit like the ancient riddle that I remember being taught when I was in primary school.

As I was going to St Ives, I met a man with seven wives. Each wife had seven sacks, each sack had seven cats, each cat had seven kits, kits, cats, sacks and wives.

[8 : 52] How many were going to St Ives? I hope you've just counted them all up because the answer is not 2,801 but one. They were all going from St Ives. I was the one going too.

Anyway, that's by the way. This is all full of sevens and tonight we begin the sequence of seven seals but we only get to the sixth because as is typical in this book of Revelation, you get to the, before you get to the last one there's a sort of interlude and then the last one ushers in a next sequence of seven things.

So tonight, six out of seven seals and I won't be here to deal with the seventh. Remember that breaking the seals of this scroll in the right hand of God is symbolic of bringing about the fulfilment and completion of the purposes of God.

It's not just about reading something. The scroll suggests the decrees of God, the purposes of God for the universe but unsealing it and in a sense unrolling it to read actually brings about the fulfilment of all of God's purposes and remember that the one who is unsealing it is able to do so because of his death and resurrection.

So all the fulfilment and completion of the purposes of God for this universe come about and only come about because the Lamb was slain and is alive standing at the right hand of God in heaven.

[10 : 16] Without that nothing would be completed and nothing fulfilled. All the decrees of God for eternity will find their fulfilment because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

He opens the first seal and John heard one of the four living creatures one of those four creatures immediately around the throne of God in heaven.

He heard one of those creatures call out as with a loud voice of thunder come! And what does John see? there was a white horse its rider had a bow and a crown was given to him and he came out conquering and to conquer.

We can end up running around in a muck trying to interpret all the different bits of colours and numbers in this book. Much of the background comes out of the Old Testament in this case out of visions in Ezekiel and also the prophet Zechariah.

Here is a military figure a conquering figure one who will bring defeat and destruction on others as he conquers on his white horse white perhaps suggesting triumph or conquest.

[11 : 36] It's certainly a picture of some military action war and victory for this white horse and therefore defeat for others.

the second horse the second seal breaks and a second horse comes again one of the living creatures the second one shouts out come here again is the issuing forth of this next figure coming right out of the throne of God they're not in a sense independent from God and this time the horse is red its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth so that people would slaughter one another and he was given a great sword it compliments the first we ought to see these sorts of visions in this book as a bit like a collage not strictly like a history lesson of one thing following another it's a sort of collage an impressionist painting in a way and this compliments the first again it's a picture of war in particular bloodshed here the red symbolizing no doubt the issue of bloodshed and it adds to the first picture and then the lamb opens the third seal and again this time the third living creature calls out come

I looked and there was a black horse this time its rider held a pair of scales in his hand that looks fairly innocuous at first looks as though he's about to do some cooking and he's going to measure the flour or something like that but it's a bit more bleak as a vision he hears what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures that must come from the throne which is in the midst of the four living creatures either from the throne of god or from the lamb and this voice says in verse six a quart of wheat for a day's pay and three quarts of barley for a day's pay but do not damage the olive oil and the wine it's an odd expression and one that on the surface might puzzle us what is this talking about but the suggestion is that just for a handful of grain of wheat or barley you need a whole day's pay for it this is like food rationing this is an exorbitant price for your daily food what's going on here is the consequence of war this is famine in ancient wars a city would be besieged by the enemy army and often they would simply try and starve out the inhabitants that almost really happened with jerusalem 600 years before jesus to the babylonians where we know that they even committed cannibalism to try and desperately stay alive within the confines of the walled city of jerusalem as their food ran out and that seems to be what's indicated here as well they're starving it's a result of war it is a famine and in order to buy just a handful of wheat or barley to eat an exorbitant amount of money is required and yet ironically it seems that the olive oil and the wine which may be regarded as relative luxuries well maybe actually there's supply of them but what point is that when you don't even have any grain the fourth seal is opened it brings about a climax really to the first three the fourth living creature and therefore the suggestion is that these horses have gone out in all directions around from the throne of god is called out come yet again the instruction comes from around the throne of god and the fourth living or the fourth horse is pale green it's a bit like a

Melbourne cup field by now isn't it four horses different colours who are you going to bet on this is an ugly looking horse pale green the greek word for this is chloros it's where we get our word chlorine so picture that sort of rather ugly pale deathly green sort of colour that's this horse it's the colour of a corpse in effect it's the colour that's leading to rot and death pale grey green notice here that this climaxes what we've seen before but adds another dimension to it as well the rider's name is death you won't see that on Tuesday afternoon and Hades followed with him they were given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill with sword famine pestilence and by the wild animals of the earth

Hades is the place of the dead in effect this is a grim picture indeed but here the destruction is not limited to war so in a sense it brings the first three to a climax and there is killing here by sword and famine but now is added in pestilence or plague or disease or that sort of epidemic if you like an early version of swine flu perhaps and death from wild animals as well here you see is widespread death that comes from man-made war as well as natural causes in effect it's an awful picture and yet it's limited I think a suggestion of the mercy of God restraining the death and destruction of these horses it's limited to merely a fourth of the earth a quarter or 25% what are these four horsemen of the apocalypse as they're often called sometimes we find interpretations that I think perhaps over limit them that suggest a particular person government rule or historical event as being described here but these four horsemen describe our world they describe

[18:05] John's world they describe the world every decade in between and they describe the world from every decade from now on till Jesus returns war lack of peace famine pestilence bloodshed death life it's a description of our world but it describes it in a way maybe subtly but very important for the readers of John's revelation who's in control the lamb is god is it's the lamb who opens the seal it is god's scroll that is being opened the voices are coming from around the throne of god in heaven in each case we find some expression like to this one was given or was permitted that is the authority to wreak destruction and havoc and warfare and lack of peace on our world is not something that is taken from god not something that is usurped from god but something that was actually given from god allowed permitted under his authority who's in control god is the lamb is see what encouragement that is for christians on earth in the midst of warfare and famine and strife and suffering and natural disasters and even persecution god is sovereign not rome not the roman emperor demission in the last century of the last decade of the first century who wreaked persecution and killed many christians around the roman empire no he's not actually in the end on the throne god is the lamb is what an encouragement in fact back in chapter one of this very revelation it's very clear who's in control jesus is risen and is lord so in chapter one verse 18 for example jesus said that he is the living one i was dead and see i am alive forever and ever and i have the keys of death and of hades and that's in effect what we see here as the lamb opens the scroll that lets forth the fourth horse called death with hades behind he holds the keys jesus is in control here so when we live in a world in which it looks as though god is far away and the prince of peace is dead and gone not so we're seen behind the door of heaven here we realize that whilst on earth it looks as though god might be impotent or has abandoned us it's not so he is sovereign still of death and hell are held by jesus the risen and alive lamb who was slain this is a vision to give encouragement it's a vision of a description of our world then as now equally apposite but it tells us who's in control it is god it is god in fact here in these four horsemen of the apocalypse we find in this odd imagery exactly what jesus himself taught relatively clearly to his disciples before his death in a famous speech in effect of jesus to his disciples as he described the times that would lie ahead of him them after his death he said you will be you will suffer wars there will be rumors of wars there will be persecution earthquakes and famines and all those sorts of things and here they all are mark 13 for example in parallels in luke and matthew say the same thing

war strife pestilence earthquake persecution and christians are not promised immunity from those things the disciples weren't in the gospels by jesus and here is the same we will suffer in this fallen corrupted aching decaying world and that leads us to the fifth seal when the lamb opened the fifth seal i saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of god and for the testimony they had given under the altar in the holy place of god's presence protected guarded by god is i think the suggestion here they're safe with god martyred on earth but safe with god these are the souls of those who've been slaughtered for the word of god and for the testimony they have given they're not just christians who've died but these are christian martyrs people who've been put to death simply because of their faith and faithfulness and testimony to the gospel of jesus christ death is not the end they are safe with god and indeed still alive for in the next verse verse 10 they pray they cry out sovereign lord holy and true how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth their cry echoes that of the psalms in many places how long oh lord they are longing for vindication they are longing for god to avenge their deaths they know their deaths are unjust and they are longing for god to bring justice to this unjust world how long oh lord it's a prayer for jesus to come in effect it's a prayer for jesus the judge to judge and therefore punish with his wrath those persecutors what an encouragement to those being persecuted on earth to hear the prayers of martyrs in heaven and to look up from their suffering and to look forward to the coming in judgment and triumph of jesus christ from heavenly glory to prayer for jesus to return and judge the living and the dead but the answer to their prayer here is in effect not yet not yet is the time they were each given a white robe a white robe as is made clear later in this book of the righteousness that comes through christ here is an expression of vindication that in god's eyes now they are vindicated in his presence they are clothed in white their sins forgiven they are justified and acquitted by god already by the death of jesus for them but not yet is the final judgment they're told to rest a little longer until the number would be complete a number we'll see next sunday afternoon both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed in john's day no doubt it seems there were christians facing death we know the testimonies of many of them within 20 years a famous bishop

in the very area of these churches was put to death for being a christian bishop ignatius and no doubt dozens hundreds perhaps of others as well more were to come god's timing is not yet is what they are being told and presumably because jesus is yet to return god's timing still to us is not yet we are to wait with patient endurance because we can trust that god is in control it's the purpose of the vision and yet it seems to me that we christians at the beginning of the 21st century in the western world are so slow to pray come lord jesus i suspect that we are enjoying life and its comforts and pleasures so much that we don't really want it to end the one thing i've learned from teaching and ministering and being ministered to in other parts of the world is that we are too complacent they pray much more earnestly than us come lord jesus sometimes i think we're too absorbed in this world revelation is a healthy corrective to us one that we should embrace seriously as we embark on lives full of luxury for many of us it seems to me that the ancient christian hymns had a much stronger note of coming jesus in judgment and triumph than some of our modern songs and hymns maybe that's been corrected a little in recent times we ought to be longing for jesus return more than for any other love and this book is leading us to that triumphant prayer at the end come lord jesus come soon it ought to be a prayer never far from our lips and one that by god's grace i found myself coming back to more and more frequently as the years go by the lamb opens the sixth seal a bit of a tongue twister late in a day when i'm very tired sixth seal and now we find an astonishing picture of cosmic upheaval i looked and there came a great earthquake the sun became black as sackcloth the full moon became like blood and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale the sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up and every mountain and island was removed from its place presumably australia included cosmic upheaval vaster than the indian ocean tsunami of a few years ago this is more devastating than the recent attacks of nature in indonesia the philippines and samoa all put together this is more horrific than cyclone nagus in myanmar in may last year or the sichuan earthquake of the same month this is cosmic upheaval that is the precursor of the final judgment of god the great day of wrath has come and this is in effect part of the answer to the prayer of verse 10 how long not yet but it's coming and it's coming soon and the sixth seal is taking us ever closer christians in

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