

Who Can Stand?

Revelation 6:12-17

Introduction

During the week leading up to Jesus' crucifixion, He was asked by His disciples, "What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matt. 24:3). As you are already aware, Jesus warned that before His coming there would be false christs claiming to be Him, wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nations, kingdoms rising against kingdoms, famines, and earthquakes in various places. Jesus said these things would be "the beginning of birth pains" leading up to the end (Matt. 24:1–8).

After describing the abomination of desolation, which I believe was fulfilled in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Jesus then looked beyond those days to the Day of His coming:

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." (Matt. 24:29-31)

What Jesus describes in Matthew 24 is the same basic pattern Revelation shows us through the seals, trumpets, and bowls. These judgment cycles are not three unrelated timelines. They recapitulate the same period from different angles, each cycle intensifying until we arrive at what Scripture calls "the Day of the Lord."

The Day of the Lord is the day when God steps into history to judge the wicked, vindicate His people, and reveal that every kingdom of the world belongs to Him. This phrase appears throughout the Bible, and one of the clearest Old Testament passages behind Revelation 6 is Isaiah 2:10–19, where the proud hide in the rocks from the terror of the Lord when He rises to shake the earth:

Go into the rocks and hide in the dust from the terror of the LORD and the splendor of His majesty. The proud look of man will be humbled, and the loftiness of men brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. For the Day of the LORD of Hosts will come against all the proud and lofty, against all that is exalted— it will be humbled....

So the pride of man will be brought low, and the loftiness of men will be humbled; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day, and the idols will vanish completely. Men will flee to caves in the rocks and holes in the ground, away from the terror of the LORD and from the splendor of His majesty, when He rises to shake the earth.

That is exactly the kind of imagery John sees when the Lamb opens the sixth seal. The proud are humbled. The mighty are terrified. The earth is shaken. Every false refuge collapses. And the question at the end of Revelation 6 is not, “How powerful are the kings of the earth?” or “How secure are the kingdoms of this world?” The question is: **“Who is able to stand?”**

Before each major judgment cycle in Revelation, John is shown a heavenly throne-room scene marked by storm imagery. And just as birth pains grow stronger as the birth draws near, the storm imagery intensifies as Revelation moves toward the final judgment. You can see this intensification in the way Revelation describes the storm coming from the throne:

Revelation 4:5	Revelation 8:5	Revelation 11:19	Revelation 16:18, 21
Out from the throne came flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God;	Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and hurled it to the earth; and there were peals of thunder and sounds, and flashes of lightning and an earthquake.	And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder, and an earthquake, and a great hailstorm.	And there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder; and there was a great earthquake, such as there had not been since mankind came to be upon the earth, so great an earthquake <i>was it, and so mighty....</i> ²¹ And huge hailstones, weighing about a talent each, came down from heaven upon people; and people blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, because the hailstone plague was extremely severe.

We will look at each of these passages as we encounter them throughout this series. For now, all I want you to see is that each cycle of judgment describes a series of judgments that intensify the closer we come to what the Bible calls the Day of the Lord. History is not spinning out of control. There are no rogue molecules. Kings and rulers may strive after whatever they desire, but at the end of the day, Proverbs 21:1 is still true: **“The king’s heart is a waterway in the hand of the LORD; He directs it where He pleases”** (BSB). The same kings and rulers who seem so powerful now will one day cry out for the mountains and rocks to hide them from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 6:15–16).

Listen to me. Last week, when we looked at the opening of the fifth seal, we saw those who had been slain because of the word of God and because of the testimony they had maintained. They cried out, **“How long, O Lord?”** But they were not questioning God’s character. Their question

was not about *if* God would judge, but *when* He would judge. And when the sixth seal is opened, John sees the answer.

Jesus breaks the sixth seal, as He has with the previous five, serving as another reminder that all that has happened and will happen is under His sovereign will. Jesus' second coming will be cosmic, comprehensive, and conclusive.

The Day of the Lord will be Cosmic (vv. 12-14)

When the Lamb opens the sixth seal, creation shakes. John sees a great earthquake, the sun blackened, the moon turning like blood, the stars falling to the earth, the sky rolling up like a scroll, and every mountain and island moved from its place. If we count the mountains and islands separately, John gives us a sevenfold picture of cosmic upheaval: earthquake, sun, moon, stars, sky, mountains, and islands. In a book where the number seven repeatedly signifies fullness, the point is clear: nothing in the cosmos will remain unmoved on the Day of the Lord.

John is not giving us a scientific report of future astronomical events. He is using apocalyptic language to describe the severity of the judgment that will come when Jesus returns, especially the wrath that cities, nations, and empires will face when the true King of kings and Lord of lords comes to claim what belongs to Him. When Babylon fell, Isaiah spoke of the stars of heaven not giving their light, the sun being darkened, the moon not shining, the heavens trembling, and the earth being shaken out of its place (Isa. 13:9–13). When Egypt was judged, Ezekiel spoke of the heavens being covered, the stars being darkened, the sun being covered with a cloud, and the moon not giving its light (Ezek. 32:7–8). This does not mean there will be no supernatural, cataclysmic events that affect the cosmos at Jesus' coming. It simply means John's main point is not to satisfy our curiosity about the mechanics of the end, but to show us the severity of the judgment.

John joins Isaiah and Jesus in using apocalyptic language to describe what is coming, but his words point to more than mere symbolism. The language used to describe the judgment of Egypt, Babylon, Jerusalem, and Rome pointed to very real and very severe judgments in history. But what John describes in the sixth seal points beyond those temporal judgments to the great and final Day of the Lord, when God will judge the wicked, vindicate His people, and reveal that every kingdom of the world belongs to Him.

On the Day of the Lord, the world mankind trusted in, built upon, exploited, and worshiped will not shelter him from the One who made it all. Richard Phillips is right to describe verses 12–14 as a kind of “de-creation.”¹ The old world, corrupted by Adam's sin and condemned for rejecting God's Son, will be shaken so that the new creation promised by God may come. John sees that everything that once seemed fixed, permanent, immutable, and dependable is shaken before the presence of God. When the Lamb breaks the sixth seal, creation comes undone.

¹ Richard D. Phillips, *Revelation*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 230–233.

The Day of the Lord will be Comprehensive (vv. 15-16)

If verses 12–14 give us a sevenfold picture of creation being shaken, verses 15–16 give us a sevenfold picture of humanity being exposed. The point is unmistakable: from kings to slaves, from the powerful to the powerless, from the highest throne to the lowest status in life, no one is exempt. The Day of the Lord will be comprehensive.

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?”

All classes of society are mentioned in these verses. All are judged not by their status in the world but by their standing before the One on the throne and by whether they have been covered by the blood of the Lamb. Salvation cannot be found in wealth. It does not come from what one has accomplished in life. Nor is salvation automatically given to the poor, the slave, or the homeless simply because they had little or nothing on earth. The problem of mankind is a problem of the soul and the heart. All are born in sin, all are in rebellion, all are unrighteous, all are spiritually dead, and all enter this world as children of wrath.

What we discover in each cycle of judgment is the hardening of the human heart. As the seals are broken, a fourth of the earth is given over to death, yet mankind does not run to the Lamb for salvation but hides from Him (Rev. 6:16). As the trumpets sound, judgment intensifies to one-third, yet mankind does not heed the warning but continues in idolatry, murder, sorcery, sexual immorality, and theft (Rev. 9:20–21). As the bowls of wrath are poured out, judgment comes in full measure, yet mankind does not repent but blasphemes the God who judges them (Rev. 16:11, 21). With each cycle of judgment leading up to the Day of the Lord, the human heart is increasingly hardened against God: they hide, refuse to repent, and blaspheme.

Now, this matters because Revelation 6 does not say mankind hides only from Him who sits on the throne, but also **“from the wrath of the Lamb.”** Therefore, do not make the mistake of thinking of the Father as angry and the Son as merciful, as though the mercy of Christ stands against the wrath of the Father. As John Piper points out, “It would be a distortion if we thought of God pouring out wrath and his Son mercifully keeping us from the Father’s wrath. It would be a serious mistake to put the mercy of the Son against the wrath of the Father in this way—as if God were the just punisher and Christ the merciful rescuer.”²

This is the human condition, is it not? After Adam and Eve sinned, they fled the presence of God and hid themselves among the trees of the garden (Gen. 3:8). What the sixth seal reveals at the

² John Piper, *Come, Lord Jesus: Meditations on the Second Coming of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 109.

end is what H. B. Swete observed: “What sinners dread most is not death, but the revealed Presence of God.”³

The same Jesus who was slain to save sinners will come in wrath against those who reject His mercy. The Lamb who opens the seals is the Lamb from whom the kings of the earth beg to be hidden. For this reason, Revelation begins with these words: “**Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him**” (Rev. 1:7).

The Day of the Lord will be Conclusive (v. 17)

Christians have discussed the second coming of Christ ever since the apostles heard it from Jesus’ own lips. The apostles and the first-century church expected the Day of the Lord to be imminent. Every generation of believers lived with the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus. Yet even in Peter’s day, some mocked the promise of His coming, assuming that because judgment had not yet come, it never would. But Peter reminds us that God has judged the world before, and by that same word, the present heavens and earth are being kept for the day of judgment:

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. (2 Pet. 3:8–10)

Here is what we know: Jesus is coming back. He is coming suddenly. He is coming in a way that will surprise the world. And my fear is that when He comes, He will surprise many who call themselves Christian.

The sixth seal ends with a very important question, perhaps the most important question you can ask yourself: “**Who can stand?**” When Jesus comes and the “Day of the Lord” becomes the experience and reality of our world. When the prophetic word that the Day is coming becomes a part of human history, there will be no escaping it. The answer to “Who can stand?” is simple: No one will be able to stand. Not kings. Not generals. Not the rich. Not the powerful. Not the slave. Not the free. Not the religious. Not the moral. Not the successful. Not the suffering. Not the person who had everything in this life, and not the person who had nothing.

The question is not whether Jesus is coming. He is. The question is not whether the Day of the Lord will come. It will. The question before each of us this morning is this: “When that day comes, will you be able to stand?” When Jesus comes, will He recognize you as belonging to Him? What will you hear from His lips on that Day? Jesus spoke of a time that is coming:

³ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indices*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 94–95.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” (Matt. 7:21-23)

Revelation 7 answers the question, “Who can stand?” Only those sealed by God will be able to stand. Only those washed in the blood of the Lamb will be able to stand. But today is the day of salvation! Today there is no need to hide. The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to something far better: Do not hide from the Lamb. Run to the Lamb for salvation. The only safe place from the wrath of the Lamb is in the mercy of the Lamb.

So the question is not whether Jesus is coming. He is. The question is not whether the Day of the Lord will come. It will. The question is this: when that day comes, will you be able to stand?