

5. Who can stand?

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[0 : 00] And now let's have a moment's prayer as we begin to look at Revelation 7. Let's pray. God our Father, we pray indeed as we look into this glorious passage, that you will take my human words in all their imperfection, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and that you will lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. One of the most dangerous and deceitful teachings around today is what is sometimes called the prosperity gospel.

The advocates of the prosperity gospel tell us that since we are sons and daughters of God, since we are people of faith, that we are entitled to health, we are entitled to wealth, we are entitled to pass through this life claiming all the promises of God.

And that if we are not receiving these things, then we are told it's because our faith is not strong enough. And we are told if we trusted the Lord, these things would inevitably be showered upon us. Now that's a very attractive and seductive view, is it not? Most of us would love to live in a world like that, wouldn't we? It would be great if we lived in a world where every time somebody opened their mouth to tell a lie, or to say something unkind, the words wouldn't come.

[1 : 38] It would be great if we lived in a world where if we fell from a cliff onto the rocks below, they simply didn't harm us. It would be great if every time we felt ill, we were automatically cured.

But we know very well we don't live in a world like that. And people who are fed the prosperity gospel, when, as inevitably happens, bad things come upon them, then they very soon simply torture themselves into thinking they don't have enough faith, or they simply fall away from the faith altogether.

Now we know that sometimes God does intervene wonderfully. Think about the book of Daniel, think about the blazing furnace and the lion's den. Think about Peter rescued from prison as the church prayed for him.

I'm pretty certain most people here can think of circumstances in their own life, when disaster loomed ahead and God in a wonderful way rescued us.

And I'm sure there are many, many more incidents that you didn't even know about, where God intervened and saved us from disaster. And yet, God's people, the same as other people, suffer calamities, accidents, violence, illnesses, hardships, and death.

[2 : 58] But that's not the whole answer, is it? The prosperity gospel is wrong. The prosperity gospel is deceptive. Nevertheless, the Bible does teach the security of the believer.

And I want to look at this chapter as we think about that. Now this is part of the long section of the book, chapters 6 to 16, where the Lamb launches a series of judgments on the world.

The judgment of the seals, the judgment of the trumpets, and the judgment of the bulls. Now while I said last week, these are parallel series of judgments, so they're not just repetitions.

So we'll see next week. The judgment of the trumpets don't simply reproduce the judgment of the seals. It's the same period, but it's looked at in a different way.

But within these chapters, there are a number of interludes. And this is the first of them. And these interludes are answering the question, what is happening to God's people when these judgments are being unleashed on the earth?

[4 : 04] Are they in any way protected from these judgments? So as I say, we're not believing in the prosperity gospel, saying they have no effect on us at all.

And yet, clearly, there is protection for God's people. Now these judgments are unleashed over the earth. And glance back at the ending of chapter 6.

The great day of their wrath has come. That's God and the Lamb. And who can stand? This chapter is answering the question, who can stand?

That's my title for this chapter this evening. Who can stand? When these judgments are, when the four horsemen of the apocalypse are riding the length and breadth of the earth and throughout the whole of history, who can stand?

Now this chapter answers it in two ways. There are two great realities. There are two parallel sections in this chapter. First of all, in verses 1 to 8, the present security of God's people on earth. [5 : 13] And secondly, the future bliss of God's people in heaven. Verses 9 to 17. Now, when I say future, that of course is not entirely true, is it?

And the reason I said they're parallel sections is because many of God's people, millions of God's people, are already enjoying the reality of verses 9 to 17 and all one day will.

But, essentially, the first section dealing with security on earth, the church militant on earth, and then, verses 9 to 17, the church triumphant in heaven.

So let's look first of all then at the security of God's people on earth. If God's people are subject to the same judgments, the same afflictions, the same calamities as everybody else, in what sense are they protected?

And first of all, in verse 1, and indeed on to verse 3, God's people are protected by angels. God's people are protected by God's angels.

[6 : 25] One important truth that you cannot ignore in the book of Revelation is the vast importance of God's angels in his government of the universe.

The absolutely integral part they play. Now you get this in the Old Testament, Psalm 103, verses 20 to 21, Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his will.

Angels have fared very, very badly in the history of the church. They've either been exalted to a position they don't deserve, and this is obviously happening in the letters of the Hebrews because the author there begins saying Christ is greater than angels.

Difficult to imagine a modern teacher or preacher saying that. It's obvious the Hebrew Christians were giving far too exalted a place to angels. There's evidence of that in the letters of the Colossians as well.

What happens to angels today is they tend to be ignored, they tend to be trivialized, and if you go to the mind, body, and spirit section of Waterstones and look at the company that books on angels keep, you can see what I mean.

[7 : 32] They keep company with tarot cards and that sort of thing. But these are not biblical angels. These are only fantasies of people's minds. You see here what John is saying.

Angels are involved in the natural forces. Hold back the four winds of the earth that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree.

And I saw another angel, he says, ascending, saying, Do not harm, verse 3, Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the servants of God.

And in chapter 14, we read of the angel who had charge of a fire. And in chapter 16, the angel of the waters. So angels are involved in the government of the universe and in the controlling of natural forces.

How many of us thank God for the ministry of angels? If we don't do that, I think we should consider doing it. Because I think only when we reach heaven will we realize how much we have owed to God's angels.

[8 : 41] Now the point, of course, of the ministry of angels is it's almost always unseen. I'm not talking about these sensational things you get from American tele-evangelists, some of whom claim that they can conjure angels up on the stage.

This reminds me of that part in Shakespeare, I can call spirits from the vasty deep. So why so can I? But will they come when you do call on them? And the ministry of angels is unseen.

We've been to see in chapter 11 the ministry of angels as the church spreads the gospel. Now that's something we probably don't think about very much. But that's the subject of chapter 11.

Many years ago, Billy Graham wrote a book on angels which he called God's secret agents. And that just about strikes the right note. They are there, they are unseen.

So part of the protection of God's people in this world during the time of the church on earth is angel protection. But the second thing here is the sealing of God's people.

[9 : 47] Verse 3, Till we have sealed the servants of God on their foreheads. The seal marks them out as God's people. Later in chapter 13, the anti-God brigade are those who have the mark of the beast.

Now you see, once again, this is not something that's visible externally. Almost certainly, originally, it comes from the Passover, placing the mark of blood on the door so the destroying angel would pass over.

And similarly, in Ezekiel 9, when the city of Jerusalem is about to be destroyed at the exile, a mark is put on the foreheads of those who trust in God.

But that seal is ultimately the Holy Spirit himself. Ephesians chapter 1, sealed with the promised Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our inheritance.

You see what that means? That seal means that we cannot be lost. If the Spirit of God indwells us, we cannot be lost.

[10:58] And the seal is nothing outward, it is the blessed Holy Spirit himself. But thirdly, the total number of God's people is sealed.

I heard the number of those sealed. Verse 4, 144,000. And there are at least 144,000 weird and wonderful explanations of this number.

The Jehovah's Witnesses tell us that they are the 144,000. I don't know how they keep their statistics, but that is what they say. Others argue that it is simply ethnic Israel because it says the tribe of the sons of Israel.

But that is to draw a wedge that the Bible doesn't do between the Old Testament and the New Testament people of God. They are one people of God. The number is clearly symbolic.

Now, if there are any mathematicians here, you can correct me afterwards. I understand that 144,000 is 12 squared and multiplied by 1,000.

[12:06] I have absolutely no idea if that's true or not because I've never been any good at figures. But it is clearly a symbolic number. The 12 tribes of Israel and, of course, the 12 apostles standing for all the people of God throughout all the centuries.

Something like football results. Judah, 12,000. Reuben, 12,000. I'm tempted to say, but I won't. Aston Villa, 0, Newcastle, United, 6. I won't say it. But it obviously means the complete, the total number of God's people from the very beginning until the very end.

Commentators wonder why the tribe of Dan isn't mentioned. It may be because Dan, if you read Kings and Chronicles, became a centre of idolatry, became an anti-God shrine.

And I think the point of giving a specific number is that the number is known to God. The testimony of the Lord stands sure.

The Lord knows those who are his. My name from the palms of his hand, eternity, will not erase. Every single believer is known to God.

[13:19] And all of them are part. We're going to come across the 144,000 again in chapter 14. I believe it's the same people. So presently on earth, as we struggle on earth, we are protected by angels, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit, and we are, the total number of God's people is safe.

That goes on now to this glorious passage, verses 9 to 17, which is one of the very, very great and wonderful passages in Scripture. Now the after this, remember in Revelation, after this, is not necessarily chronological.

John is seeing a series of visions. It's rather like somebody going around a great art gallery and looking at a series of pictures, sometimes pictures showing the same scene from different angles and so on.

So the after this is not necessarily meaning chronological. It means this is the next vision he sees. Who can stand? stand? It's the question. Looking at verse 9, standing before the throne and the Lamb.

There is the answer to the question, who can stand? Now, notice first of all, it's a great multitude that no one can number.

[14:37] Now I want to argue this is the same as the 144,000. 144,000 means the number is known to God. God knows all his people and that includes those of course who don't yet know him.

Perhaps people yet unborn who are going to come to know him. Because this great scene is so often in Revelation. This is a scene which is happening now but it's also going to be fulfilled completely in the future.

So verses 1 to 8 and verses 9 to 17 are in many senses parallel because they are both talking about the security of God's people.

The great multitude seems to me that in human terms the number is absolutely incalculable. One day Peter said to the Lord Jesus Christ, Lord, are there few who are saved?

Here's the answer. a great multitude no one could count. Heaven is not empty. Heaven is populated with all the people of God.

[15:48] So who is there? The great multitude. And of course the fulfilment of a much more ancient promise. The promise to Abraham. God says to Abraham in Genesis 15 how many descendants will you have?

Remember Abraham at that point was struggling because he didn't even have one descendant. God says look up at the sky count the stars go down to the shore count the grains of sand that is what your offspring are going to be like.

A great multitude no one could count. So who is there? People who are wearing white robes. White robes in Revelation symbolise the righteousness of Christ.

like the letters of the Romans says chapter 13 the verse that led to the conversion of the great Augustine put on the Lord Jesus Christ clothed with palm branches in their hands and that recalls the triumphal entry into Jerusalem when the Lord rode into Jerusalem in order to accomplish redemption that would lead to this scene here.

not one of them is missing. And why is that? Not one of them is missing because they are all sealed by the Spirit.

[17:11] It's as if the Spirit says Father you've placed me in this child of yours to bring her to bring him to glory and we're going to make it.

there's no possibility that we are not going to arrive there. It's going to be tough but it's going to happen. So who is there?

Every redeemed person across the world across the ages not one missing. And what's actually happening then in this scene? Now the focus as you'll see is on God and on the Lamb.

Verse 10 Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb. The angels, the elders fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God.

Remember in the story of the prodigal son we read of joy in heaven over one sinner repenting. Just imagine the joy in heaven when every redeemed sinner safely arrives there.

[18:16] The angels, the saints rejoice that the purpose of God is completed. redemption has not failed. God's purposes are being carried out.

And like chapters 4 and 5 we looked at a week or two ago, the great enthronement scene in heaven. This is a scene which is partially true now. This is the reality now.

And think about it for a moment. As the apostle looked into heaven and saw this great multitude, who would see, he would see you there, if you're a believer.

You are part of that great multitude. This is the reality. However tough, however difficult, however troublesome it may be now, this is the reality.

Until the last stone is added to the building, and this scene becomes the ultimate and eternal reality. So who is there, the great multitude?

[19:22] What's happening? Tremendous rejoicing, but at this moment is anticipating the full redemption, but then it's realizing the full redemption.

Why are they there? This is verses 13 and 14. It's very common in apocalyptic writing. This is Daniel's question and answer. One of the elders addressed was saying, who are these? clothes in white robes, and from where have they come? I said to him, sir, you know, he said, these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.

Now once again we've got two parallel statements. The first one is, these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. Now I don't think that some interpreters of Revelation think this is an elite group who have been through a particularly severe period called the great tribulation and are now exalted into heaven because of that.

I think the great tribulation is frankly all of the tribulations suffered by all of God's people throughout all the centuries. This is the great tribulation because it's been tough.

[20:29] It's tough for everyone. Not all God's people are persecuted. Not all God's people suffer great things. But all God's people find it tough.

It's so tough isn't it to be a Christian. When we are singing these glorious songs that we've been singing it's quite easy to believe a Monday morning. It's not so easy. It's tough.

It's difficult. So the great tribulation is the experience, the tough experience of the journey. But notice the other parallel phrase. In case we imagine this is an elite group who are there because of special faithfulness.

No, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. In other words, they are there by grace. Why is anyone there at the moment? Why is anyone going to be there in the future? They're going to be there because of the sacrifice of Christ. That's why you discover some people don't actually want to go there.

[21 : 31] When they discover they have to sing worthy is the Lamb, what they actually want to sing is worthy am I. but no of them will ever sing that in the heavenly court.

What? We are only there. We're only sealed in the present and sealed in the future because of the work of Christ the Lord. So, why are they there?

They are there because of grace. And where are they? Verse 15. They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple.

Now, we're going to see this even more clearly when we come to the end of the book. We've got to remember that when the Bible describes the world to come, the unseen world, it uses pictures and metaphors which hint at the reality.

Now, the temple, of course, is the symbol of the presence of God. Long ago, the tabernacle in the desert and then the temple in Jerusalem, the place where God met his people, and where they met him.

[22 : 38] And even before that, we're going back still further, the Lord God planted a garden in Eden and there he placed the people he had made. There he came and walked with them.

Now, we have to respond to this imaginatively, not pedantically. Some people say this contradicts the later chapter of Revelation, I saw no temple in the city.

Now, of course, it doesn't. What both of these, once again, think of our picture gallery, both of these are showing the same reality from different angles. Now, once again, Revelation tells us there is no night there.

Well, how do these serve him day and night in his temple? The point surely is it's talking about they are continually worshipping him, not talking about, say, and remember, by the way, night is not evil in itself.

Think back to Genesis 1, the evening and the morning were the first days. It's the fall and the curse which have associated darkness with evil. And then there's a whole rite of images drawn from the Old Testament, from Isaiah, from Psalm 23, and of course, John 10, the lamb in the midst of the throne, verse 17, will be their shepherd.

[23 : 51] Notice the hunger no more, neither thirst any more. Fundamental needs, totally satisfied, the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

Now, in our climate, we'd be very happy for the sun and scorching heat, but in the eastern country, with the relentless pounding of the rays of the sun, you can see what's being said here, and he will guide them to the springs of living water.

And this beautiful and tender phrase picked up from Isaiah 25, God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. This is a kind of hourglass passage, is it not?

The Old Testament flows through it, all these images and pictures and ideas, and then it broadens out again into eternity. This is a passage that shows us that God is going to fulfil his purpose.

Now, you see, if you read reports about what's happening to the church, they make dismal, they make appalling reading. Church of Scotland, we are told, will run out of money by 2015.

[25 : 01] The only thing that surprised me there, it's going to last as long as that. We read churches decaying, a report from the Methodist church says won't have any children's services by 2015 because there will be no children, and so on.

Now, of course, these reports have a certain value. They teach us not to be complacent, they teach us not to be like the church in Sardis and the church in Laodicea.

How is it all going to end? This is how it is going to end. I saw a great multitude that no one could number from every nation, all tribes and people and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

And you see, what John is saying to us is, since your path to glory cannot be thwarted, since you are sealed by the Spirit of God.

Live now in the light of then. Amen. Let's pray. John writes, I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, to have a loud voice from the throne, saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with humans, he will dwell with them.

[26 : 25] And they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. Father, we pray that this glorious passage may encourage us in the tough times, and as we feebly struggle on earth, we may catch echoes of the distant triumph song, so that we may run the race looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, whose name we pray.

Amen.