



# Who Can Stand?

Sermon – Aiden Sibrava

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*Genesis 6:3 And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.*

This is God's response to the wickedness of humanity and fallen angels in Genesis 6:3. He says: *I will not strive forever. The human will die, one day, one way or another.*

In the natural order, death is part of life. In fact, there are many times when death colludes with life to bring life all the more. In the body, senescent cells are marked and eradicated to prevent cancer taking hold. In nature, dead leaves fall, fungi rots and nourishes the ground: bringing new life to forests. And yet despite death's inextricable partnership with life, the Bible teaches that one is not inherent to the other; at least, not necessarily.

For God, the one who gives us life, is able to bestow a life undying. Indeed, the story of Genesis tells of a humanity which would work in partnership with God to keep the earth he made; and in that blessed partnership they would enjoy the sustaining gift of life from God, given through what's called 'The Tree of Life'.

The tree - an emblem, maybe - but at the very least a symbol of God's sustaining friendship with the creature he had made. No longer subject to death, as long as they walked in fellowship with him.

And yet, of course, you know the story. Even if you've never read Genesis chapter 3, you know the story. We do *not* live forever.

Instead, we “go the way of all the world,”<sup>1</sup> to quote King David. And why? Well, the Bible says it’s because we rejected God. When he was near, we hid: not in him, but among the bushes...in a futile attempt to hide the shame of the tragic choices we so often make, when we make ourselves as God and yet are not.

“My spirit will not strive with man forever,” God says.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve tried to hide. In Revelation 6, humanity again *tries to hide* as God draws near in judgement. As in the beginning, so in the end, it seems.

Now, as we consider today’s Bible passage and the theme of judgement found within it, it’s worthwhile thinking about *how* God judges humanity. You see, it is *Jesus* who takes and opens the scroll in this passage, initiating judgement. In Revelation 5:4, John wept and wept because no-one was found worthy to take the scroll and open it...until the Lamb, symbolising *Jesus*, drew near.

Jesus is, of course, uniquely qualified to judge humanity. Why? Because he knows what it is to be humanity’s creator (Colossians 1: *All things were created through him and for him*), and he knows what it is to be a human (John 1:14, *the Word became flesh*). You see, he knows what it is to be our maker and he knows what it is to be us. Indeed, he *is* our maker and he *is* us. (At least, one of us.) And not only that, but he is the redeemer: Salvation comes to those who trust in Christ, because of Christ and what he’s done.

And so, in 6:1, the Lamb begins the work of judgement.

*As is his right!*

Now there are two kinds of judgement which fall upon humanity in the scriptures. One is ‘active’; the other is ‘passive’. So often the

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 2:2

judgement is passive. God said, *my spirit will not strive with man forever*. And so we die—sooner or later. Other times the judgement is *active*. In the Genesis story, we die by default because God *actively* took humanity and expelled us from his garden, setting a *fiery angel* in place to guard the way back to the tree of life. Whether it's a metaphor or what you would have seen on the day, it speaks to God's deliberate action in judgement.

And what we see today in *Revelation* is that there is set a day when *all* promissory notes come **due**. And every debt is squared. And as the Lamb unseals the scroll, judgement falls. It's like...cosmic *release*. Like the trigger of a rifle or the snapping of a band. As Jesus opens the seals on the scroll, each in turn, it's a bit like Indiana Jones stepping on a flagstone in a temple - a seal is opened - something happens. Another - something happens.

Sometimes it's an active judgement, like the first seal - it releases a rider who goes forth as a warrior bent on conquest... Other times it's passive, like the rider with the scales in hand. It seems that his mere presence in the world is a declaration of economic upheaval and shortages...an ominous theme, this end of 2021.

The red rider and his colt are *both* an active *and* passive judgement. We're told that he takes peace from the earth - passive. And makes people kill each other - active. Similarly, the pale horse of verse eight, is given power over a quarter of the earth *to kill* by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

You see, these *beings* unleashed with the first four seals are what's called *the four horsemen of the apocalypse*, a symbol of God's judgement falling upon the world. Not just passive, but now also active and decisive...a day when God says, "Enough!" to all the evil. All our sin. All the crimes that go unpunished. Unjust systems,

structures which defile the image of God...and the legions who will justify their wrongs by others' wrongs... God says, "*Enough!*"

But it's not over yet. No, notice how the saints react. Not all is made right yet, for in verse 10, they cry out: "*How long until you judge, O Lord?*" I mean, look around, right...? But this isn't all there is to say. And so they're told to wait...and so we wait...and watch.

And you wonder, at this point, how will the world react? How would you react?

Of course, the complicating factor is, we're dealing with apocalyptic language, the language of the dream, or vision—so my expectation is that there will not really be four riders riding forth upon the clouds... I mean, God can do what he wants, but...this is imagery you *feel*, as much as see. So will the numbers correspond? Or the sequences? Well I don't really know, but I kind of think Revelation invites us to 'just go with it'.

So how will the world react? How *does* the world react?

Because this is a word to the church throughout the ages, right? It's not the sealed section of your Bible with a sticker labelled, "Open in case of Horsemen." This has something to say to the peasant of 536 A.D., as much as it has something to say to the student of 2021 C.E.

So how *does* the world react, when they're confronted with the judgement of God? In that moment where—maybe literally, one day, but certainly *figuratively* in so many of our lives—how *do* they react in that moment where the sun turns black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the moon turns red, and the stars of heaven fall to earth? That moment when the sky is rolled up as a scroll, and the earth stands bare before its God?

It's the language of the prophetic...the apocalyptic...the **poetic**... and I think that's the right category to think in, because that's the category we experience. Some people live charmed lives. But for most, there are moments where your blood runs cold. "I'm sorry. We lost him..." "We were unable to get there in time." "We did all we could..." "Two planes have..." "Our intelligence was faulty." There are a thousand and one reminders that we live in a broken world and that our relationship with the God of life is *damaged*.

And on top of that, at least in some sense, God is *in* the storm, right? I mean if you believe in the sovereignty of God, then these things happen *in his sovereignty*. I'm not saying that they are as they *should* be, or as God *sought* for them to be...but the things which shake us, shake us under God.

So how will we react?

How does the world react?

Well verse 15 says that rather than stand still upon the surface of a world laid bare before the judge of all flesh...

*...the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. <sup>16</sup> They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! <sup>17</sup> For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?'*

What do we do when we're confronted with the consequence of human sin? We hide. Adam and Eve hid in the garden...and apparently so do we.

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You know, somewhere in the world I'd love to see is *Raven Rock Mountain Complex*, also called 'Site R'. It is to the U.S. Government what Area 51 is to, well...*you know!* That is to say, it is underground, incredibly secret, and completely inaccessible to people like you and me. Located in Pennsylvania, Raven Rock is a vast nuclear bunker carved into the granite Blue Ridge Mountains (the ones from the song *Take Me Home, Country Road*) and it is literally an underground city able to sustain up to 3,000 people once the blast doors are sealed shut. And that is one of the places where the U.S. Government may take refuge in case of nuclear war. There are others like it: the Cheyenne Mountain Complex or, here in Sydney, there were shelters in the city railways in WWII. Canberra has those tunnels underground...but we don't talk about those...

The point is, Revelation is spot-on; that's exactly what we do. When faced with the consequences of our estrangement from the one who "*makes wars cease to the ends of the earth*",<sup>2</sup> we call out to the mountains, "*Hide us!*"

The question is, *where should you hide?* Right? *Where should you hide?*

And that's where I want to read again, one of my very favourite Bible passages. One which means more and more to me as the years go on. From Nahum chapter 1, verse 2-7:

*<sup>2</sup> The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on his foes /and vents his wrath against his enemies. <sup>3</sup> The Lord is slow to anger but great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet. <sup>4</sup> He rebukes the sea and*

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 46:9

*dries it up; he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade. <sup>5</sup> The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it. <sup>6</sup> Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him.*

*<sup>7</sup> The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, <sup>8</sup> but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into the very realm of darkness.*

I love these verses because you envision this crazy prophet dressed in burlap, standing on the street corner and crying out unto the masses trapped in apathy, *"The day of judgement is at hand!"* And if you were to believe him, that's the moment, right? That's the moment when you'd run into the mountains and the hills, into Raven Rock and cry out, "Hide us!" And yet...where is the safe place? On the day when God *"is in the whirlwind and the storm"*?

*Verse 7: The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.*

The place to hide is in God. The calmest place in a cyclone is in the eye of the storm. We're counselled to go **to** him, not away.

So what does this mean for us now?

Well we need to know that God will act in judgement. He has set a day when he will judge the world in righteousness<sup>3</sup> - and that will be a **good** thing, because it is God's final and decisive "No" to sin, to unjust systems, structures which defile the image of God...and the legions who will justify their wrongs by others' wrongs... *But*

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 17:31

there is a real terror when we see the consequence of sin, whether we experience it passively as the consequence of our actions, or actively as God rebukes us, or acts in judgement on our world. But the place to run is not away, but rather towards him.

Because he is our saviour!

You know I said at the start that sometimes death colludes with life, or death brings new life...and there is one particularly striking Biblical example of that. I wonder if you can think of it?

It's Jesus. Jesus' death and resurrection brings us new life, redemption, and confidence that God is our safe place - *even on the day of wrath*. So won't you take refuge in him—today, and every day—by trusting in him?

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