

BEHOLD THE LAMB

Revelation 5

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I. Our Scripture today, Revelation 5, speaks to the theme: “Worthy is the Lamb.”

As we open to Revelation 5 we see a continuation of the throne room picture that was presented to us in Revelation 4.

Several years my wife and I talked together about what would happen if both of us died at the same time. We realized that if we died without a will our children would be at the disposition of the state of California. So we were motivated to make a will that would leave our affairs in order and leave a proper administrator and someone in the family who would take charge of the children for the rest of their growing up years. We don't anticipate that anything is going to happen to us before that time but if it did there is a will. That will expresses our desires and it is legally binding if anything happened to us. It will go into effect and it will be carried out. That will, on the other hand, will not be opened until such an eventuality takes place. It is private; it is closed until the need for it to be opened has come.

As we open the text to Revelation 5:1, we see on the right hand of God a scroll written on both sides. It was a practice in Roman times, times of the first century, that a will would be sealed and the common way for the Romans in making a will was to roll it together and tie it with seven threads. Then there were seven witnesses required by law. Each witness would take his seal and seal the knot of the thread so that all the seven threads were sealed. That will was not then opened until the appropriate time. It was expected under Roman law that when the time came for the will to be opened, all the seven witnesses would be present, each unlocking their seal. Or

someone who was the legal custodian of the witness was there to represent the witness and to open the seal. Thus the will would be opened.

I think this gives to us an excellent understanding of what is beginning to occur in this passage, that God has a will, a will that is not opened, of course, upon God's death for God does not die. But a will that is His in His heart and mind, secret and unknown to others, known only to Him, a will that exists in heaven for earth. We might add that God has a will for our own individual lives. We speak through the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done in earth it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10, KJV).

Here is a suffering church on earth. We have seen that through the early part of Revelation. Is there any outcome to the suffering? Is the destiny of the human race in the hands of a maniac or an emperor or a president or a premier? Or is it in the hands of God? The Christian answer has always been destiny is in the hands of God. It will not be in a madman whose finger rests upon a trigger that will blow up the world in the end. It is God who will bring things to conclusion. His will for our own personal lives is such as well that He has missions and tasks that He wants us to perform for Him. His will is known to Him but how do we come to know it? That is the stress of the early part of this chapter 5.

II. How we come to know the will of God is through the Lamb of God; the need for the Lamb is stressed in these first five verses of chapter 5.

As we confront the fact that there is a will we see John saying that there is a scroll written on both sides.

In Biblical days paper was much different than it is today. In fact, they didn't have paper to write on as such. They extracted the pith of a bullrush plant that grew on the Nile delta and in thin strips laid it on the ground horizontally then put other strips on top of it vertically, pressed it

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together, sealed it with mud and water, then beat it to a pulp and smoothed it off with pumice stone. It kind of looked like what we'd call the paper of a brown paper bag. Because it was really the leaves of a plant, the inside strips, when you had plant fibers and laying them vertically it's easy to write with horizontal lines. But try to write on vertical lines and you have a little bit of difficulty. So in biblical times most of the writing was done on the horizontal side of things. When a person however had much to say and wanted to convey the impression that there was much to say they wrote on both sides.

That is the nature of this scroll. That God has so much for the human race to unfold. As one looks at the scroll in the hand of God on the throne, there's the impression that it's not just a lean word for the future but it is very full word.

It would be like you writing to a friend and finishing the letter on the outside of the envelope. You have a whole lot to say and you didn't get it all said on the inside. The fact that this will is sealed with seven seals means it cannot be opened except by lawful authority. You do not open a will unless you're authorized to do so. You can't even open a first-class letter unless you're authorized to do so. We don't have seals made with a ring or a mark like they did in biblical times. But we still seal things. If I have a first-class letter addressed to me and it falls into your hands, that doesn't give you the privilege by law or right or anything else to open that letter unless I have given you my authority.

The seals are all on the outside. There's something within. So great is the content of this will and so mysterious is it to those about the throne that an invitation is given by a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" (Revelation 5:2, NIV).

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A “mighty angel” (NIV). We’re not given his name. But the aspect of the word “mighty” should be underlined because it indicates that the summons went out to all of heaven and all of the universe and it takes a pretty strong voice to go that far. So it took a strong angel to speak in the universal sense, “Who in the whole universe is capable of opening God’s mind for the future?”

The one qualification that the angel gives is the one who opens the scroll must be worthy.

To the angel’s call is universal response in verse 3, “No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it” (NIV). No one was worthy to declare God’s mind.

It seems that within the created order of angels there is no angel that stands out above all the others who could walk across the sea of glass, take the scroll and say, “I am more worthy than all the rest to open this.” Neither is there any within the human race that can say, “I am more worthy than anyone else. Therefore I am uniquely entitled to unroll the future from God’s hand.” Moses can’t say, “I’m more worthy than Abraham.” Abraham can’t say, “I’m more worthy than Peter.” There’s a certain sense of equality that exists among God’s saints and God’s angels. So there is no point being made here to force one angel to stand above another or one human to stand above another. There is no one in this congregation that is more important or more worthy in God’s eyes. We’re all justified by means of the blood of Jesus Christ. Once we are justified, saved by Him, He’s the one who made us worthy and we’re all on the same ground.

Around Mother’s Day some churches have a Mother of the Year contest. I have a thing against having a contest like that. What about all the other mothers? It seems so unfair to single out one mother from the congregation and say, “This year she’s more worthy than anyone else.”

There is a sense that as we look here no one is elevated above another and all recognize the inability to open.

John's personal response is fascinating, for he breaks down and weeps. What is so emotional about this event that the scroll cannot be opened, that the response of the apostle, the prophet John would be to break down and weep inconsolably because of the fact that no one could look on the will of God?

III. I think there are two levels here we need to look at as to why John is weeping.

We need to first of all recognize our own personal plight, that without the presence of Jesus Christ in our life each of us must break down and weep for our own futility and despair, the fact that there is no plan or will of God that could be known for our lives personally were it not for Christ Jesus the Lord we would not know God and we would not know His plan.

What a tragic thing it would be as well for our families if, in a family relationship, we did not know how to live as Christians and how to put things together. Without the Lamb of God we must break down and weep. We must yet remain in our sin, without God and without hope of having assurance of anything in life.

So John, I think, could represent us weeping. He could represent our task, our position of being at the throne of God and recognizing that we really don't belong there. There's no hope for us knowing the will of God were it not for Jesus who makes God real to us.

There's also a sense that John weeps because the future without Jesus is really an unknown, a void, a blank. History is a riddle without the Lord. John is weeping because he represents a suffering church. If there is no hope out ahead then we must sit down and weep because the powers of the world are so very strong. You may be in the minority and you sit down and weep because it looks like always here will be the cursing of God and the taking of God's name in vain. Where is your suffering leading you? What is the point to everything? The hope of God's action for the future appears to be indefinitely postponed and suffering must continue. It's a

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tragic thing to look at your personal life and say, “I’m not going anywhere and I don’t have any hope.” One sits down and weeps.

John’s problem here is that it appears that the future will never be known and Christ will never close human destiny. If John had only known that the Lamb was just around the corner to take the scroll and open it, he wouldn’t have wept so much. How much of our grief in life may spring from the fact that we do not acknowledge the fact that the Lamb is about to act. So much of our grief in life is needless. There are moments when we really suffer hurt. We feel so very alone and cast off from God. We ask ourselves, “Where was God and why didn’t He come sooner?” All the while, just in the next moment of time, the Lamb is about to come and change the entire situation.

In Revelation 5:5, the elder commands John not to weep. The name “Lion of the tribe of Judah” comes from a prophecy that Jacob gave to his son Judah that he would become a lion’s whelp (Genesis 49:9). So here is the strong conqueror of the tribe of Judah who is the root or the source of David, One greater than David, One before David. He has conquered so He can open the scroll’s seals. He has conquered. This is the word of heaven in respect to Jesus. It’s not a future word: He shall conquer. But it’s past: He has conquered. Jesus has lived and has died and risen again. Therefore it can already be said to a church that looks like it’s very much on the ropes on earth, Jesus has conquered. The outcome is guaranteed.

Jesus has cinched the title. He has won. He has conquered. The outcome is sure. There are some “games” to be played and some to us appear to be won and some appear to be lost. But we do not grieve over the losses as we would if we had not, through Jesus Christ, cinched the outcome. But the loss, the bitter edge, has somehow been taken off, and as Paul says, the sting has been

removed from death because of Christ Jesus who has conquered. So this elder tells John, “Weep not. He has conquered.”

IV. That brings us in Revelation 5:6–7, into the presence of the Lamb who is now introduced before us.

His position is in the midst of the throne or between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders. He is stationed in the midst of or right at the throne, in nearer position in all the created order. His appearance is striking. For John has been told that he is to see or perceive that the Lion of the tribe of Judah is to come and break the seals and so his ears have heard “The Lion is coming” and when he looks to see he sees that the Lion is the Lamb. All the power of God in the personality of Jesus Christ is wrapped in innocence and purity and from our point of view a harmless kind of quality. All the power of God is in Him, yet He does not act in His coming to earth as a ferocious lion attacking. His power is used to help and to save.

When we look at the nations of the earth, we find that nations are great at selecting symbols that represent to them various portions of power. For example, as the symbol of the former empire of the Soviet Union, you have the bear. That empire tended to act a little bearish quite a bit. As a symbol of Great Britain, you have the lion, ready to spring and devour all of its opponents. It’s striking in America where people first learned to fly that long before man could fly we had the symbol of the eagle that soars into the air, is able to see all about it, and is able to come down with power and strike. All of the sensations of human nations are ravenous but the symbol of power in heaven is not the bear or the tiger or the eagle. Once you see and understand the symbol is the Lamb: The Lamb of God. He is seen as a lamb who was slain. The word used in the original is “the lamb who was slaughtered” or “a lamb whose throat was cut.” He still bears in heaven the marks of the wounds. His nature has been forever altered because of His love for us.

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In heaven, we still see the wound in His side and the prints in His hands and His feet. He is remembered as having been slain and the marks are still upon Him.

But this Lamb is not dead. For although this Lamb was slain He is standing and He is ready to act.

There's an intense drama coming up in the Book of Revelation. In the Greek language the word that is used for Lamb which is used almost exclusively, with one exception, in the New Testament is used exclusively in the Book of Revelation. It can also mean "little Lamb." Coming up in Revelation is the antichrist who is called the beast, not the lamb. If you were reading this text in the Greek you would know there's a context coming between the slaughtered lamb and the mighty beast. What kind of context is that? Someone has said, "Here is the heavyweight contest of the universe; in the ring the poor slaughtered Lamb against the mighty beast. The beast doesn't have a chance. The Lamb has the power."

Look at Him who really has the power and the authority and don't be deceived by the Lamb-like appearance in that Lamb. There is power. It is He who can take the scroll and can open it for He is the slain Lamb who lives and the aspect of His power is brought out in this symbolization of the fact that He has seven horns. We think of horns being on a bull and you don't want to get in a pasture with a bull and the two horns coming after you. All I need is one horn to scare me. I don't need seven. Here is one with seven horns. That means His power is complete. It's a symbol of complete power.

And whose eyes are likewise seven, and the eyes are represented as the spirits of God, the seven spirits of God that are sent over all the earth. We recognize in Revelation that we continue to confront the symbolism of the Holy Spirit being identified. It possibly arises from the fact that in

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each of the letters to the seven churches the Lord would say, “He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit has to say to the churches.”

In this phrase Jesus has the seven eyes, the Holy Spirit sent to all the earth, a way of saying although the lamb is in heaven, his eyesight and His presence is on earth. Jesus is present on earth through the power of the Holy Spirit. Indeed Jesus is present here with us right now in this very room but we understand that He is about the throne and while He is the one slain and while He is all-powerful, right now He is among us through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Jesus is in this place. His appearance therefore we have described and He takes the scroll.

He does not immediately open it. What I want to note here as we pause for verse 7 to verse 8 is if you were a photographer taking this you would take it in stop action sequence. You would be framing it because we would expect that once the Lamb takes the scroll He opens it. But before He opens it and discloses to the church what is to come, the instinct of heaven and indeed the instinct of the church as well is to fall down and worship. The future is in His hands.

I don't need to know who the antichrist is. I don't need to know the date of his coming. I don't know how he's going to put it all together, I don't even need to know if he's coming before, after, or in the middle of the tribulation. I just have to know that the future is in God's hands.

What is my instinct when I know this? I fall down and worship. I worship before He does anything because my hope is not in Him on the basis of some action He has yet to take. My hope is in Him because of who He is and who already He's demonstrated Himself to be: the Lord God omnipotent.

V. So before He does anything, worship takes place.

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This is always to be the response of our heart as we wait before the Lord. To worship Him, before He has come through in the bottom of the ninth in our own personal situation. We say, “Thou art Lord and God.”

So the worship ensues in Revelation 5:9–14. The first ones to worship are the four living ones around the throne and the elders. By the way, when we come to that word “worship” we recognize that the command of heaven is very clear that we can worship none but God alone. Here worship is being given in heaven to Jesus Christ. You don’t worship an angel. You don’t worship a created being. You don’t worship a man. Those religious cults and sects that have come along and made Jesus something less than God simply have not understood this basic thrust of the Scripture. That you shall worship the Lord God only, and here worship is being given in given to Jesus. He is more than an angel, more than a man. He is God.

Those holding harps and golden bowls react to the presence of the Lamb by falling down in worship.

In Revelation one does wrong to press symbolism in a literal scene. It is intended to be taken symbolically. It’d be pretty tough to hold a harp and golden bowls at the same time and fall down. What is being represented is visualization. Howbeit biblical harps would have been smaller. The aspect of harp indicates the music that is represented in worship. And the fact that the golden bowls full of incense are the prayers of the saints indicate that through our prayers we are now in heaven celebrating this triumphant scene.

What is this business of angels holding our prayers in golden bowls? Do we pray through angels? Are they kind of a collection agency in heaven or what is being represented? We see here the angels by the way, these living ones are playing a very passive role. They’re simply holding golden bowls, which are the prayers and the incense. We have to go back to the Old Testament to

find out really what's going on here. Psalm 141:2 kind of puts it together where the Psalmist cries, "Let my prayer be set before thee as incense. And the lifting of my hands as the evening sacrifice." If you wanted to visually represent prayer—prayer cannot be seen, it can only be heard. If you wanted to visually represent it, you could through incense, the wafting of the smoke and the sweet smell before God.

What is pictured here is the elders and the living ones are worshipping. Joining in that worship are the prayers of the saints from earth which are represented in the golden bowls full of incense. Prayers are put in a golden bowl.

I don't want to press overly the symbolism here but I want to say that sometimes we don't think our prayers are worth that much. We may even throw them to God rather quickly and cheaply. But God treasures the prayers of His people and if there was a place to put it literally it would be in a golden bowl representing its worth. Although our prayers may be forgotten by us, they are remembered by God about His throne as precious. So when a little child kneels by his bed at night and says, "Now I lay me down to sleep..." that prayer is in a golden bowl. It's not just a meaningless routine. When you cry from your heart, don't think your prayers didn't get further than the ceiling. They are about the throne of God, represented before that throne continually in His presence. We worship God through our prayer. They're not confined to a building in which we are.

They remain at the throne and so through our prayers we join worship of the Lamb. They sing a new song there. It's a new song in contrast to the old song. The song in Revelation 4 was praising God for his creation. But the song is now praising God for His redemption. The Lamb is worthy. Why is He worthy? He's worthy because of the historical fact He was slain. He is worthy because we can interpret that historical fact. Through His being slain He purchased us to

God. My death would be no advantage to you. But Jesus' death is advantage to all because His death pays the penalty for our sin. The result of this fact is that Jesus has made us a kingdom of priests unto God.

He has made us a kingdom of priests to God. We have been given a whole high and exalted status. Furthermore we shall reign on earth. Some of the translations say "reign," meaning that reign has already begun. Kings and priests. Not serfs or employees at McDonalds. Or where else we might work. Not that at all. But represented in terms of very high calling, a very high ministry—kings and priests.

VI. There is a certain kind of nobility that is involved in being a believer.

To the worship of the elders and the living ones the angels join in worship, in Revelation 5:11,12. They ascribe to the Lord seven qualities. When we ascribe to the Lord power, we're saying to the Lord, "You are the one who not only has the power to plan something, but the power to do everything you plan." We often have ideas and we have a lengthy list of things we want to do but we may only get one or two of them done and we may not get that done at all. But we say, "You have power, the power to conceive and to execute your plan. Praise be to You. There is nothing that you've thought of that you won't do. And praise be to you because of your riches. There are lots of things we'd like to do but our resources run thin. Your resources never run thin. You have the resources to accomplish what God has purposed to do. Praise to You Lamb of God, for there are some in this earth who have power and they have wealth but they don't know how to use it. There are some who have power and with that power persecute others. There are some who have wealth, often young people who have inherited wealth who don't know how to use it. Glory to You because You have the power and the wealth and You have the wisdom so that You know how to dispense that power and that wealth. Praise be to You because

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You have might. No situation You cannot cope with. You can therefore cope with my situation because You have might. Praise be to You because You have honor. You've earned that honor. Praise be to You because You have glory. There's a radiance about You that is like no one else. And I praise You and give You blessing."

So the blessing closes the sevenfold description of praise. There's little that we can give God. We can give Him our life. What can we give God that He doesn't already have? One thing for sure we can give Him is the praise of our mouth. What do you give to one who has everything? In this case you give Him blessing. So we bless the name of God. Then the response of all creation joins in with myriads and myriads of angels. The myriads and myriads here is literally ten thousand of ten thousand, a numberless hosts of angels. The whole universe begins to pick up the song. The whole universe is entering in. Probably not the unredeemed order but that part of creation which can respond in praise to God. In heaven, on earth and under the earth.

There's a built in frequency in nature to be able to praise God. Greeks called it the music of the spheres where they had the idea that there were a number of planets that rotated around the earth and as they went by they whistled a particular note that represented the notes of the scale. So all the notes together came to be the music of the sphere. If I had the right instrument I could tune in across the radio bands. There are a lot of sounds I'm not hearing because I don't have the right instruments. Jesus, when He was on earth, could speak to winds and waves and they obeyed Him. There was something within nature that could respond to Him.

So joining in this chorus of praise to the Lamb is all the created order joining in song. Poor persecuted Christians and letting the flock of God know that they are on the side where the whole universe joins in praise for the Lamb. When the hymn is completed the response is given again of worship. There is an "Amen." And there is a worship.

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As we come to the end of this particular passage of Scripture, we have to ask ourselves very personal and real questions. As this scene unfolds for us and we see our involvement in it, what is that involvement? Do we see ourselves in our hearts falling down before the Lamb giving Him honor and praise and glory? Or do we see ourselves as spectators and really not perhaps wanting inside, maybe wondering if we've been invited inside the scene.

This hymn in Revelation 5 is not meant simply to give us a glimpse into heaven. It's meant to direct our worship on earth. It's meant to give us a reminder every time we pray, every time we gather together as the people of God, that we do not gather together alone. We celebrate one who has won the victory and we join together in triumphal praise to the Lamb who sits upon the throne. Your life without entering into this picture of worship, must be on the outside broken and weeping because for you there is no future. But when you allow the Lamb, Christ Jesus, into your life and when you allow Him to open the book, the pages of your life will come alive to His will, and glory and blessing and honor ensue. May God cause you to open that book in the name of Jesus.

Closing Prayer

We bow and we adore You again our Father, this morning. We say again from our heart, praise be unto Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We think Lord of that moment in the gospels when John first saw You when John the Baptist introduced You with "Behold the Lamb of God." Now here at the end of his life John the Apostle has been granted this additional vision. First he had seen You by the lake of Galilee and now he sees You in heaven. The refrain is the same: "Behold the Lamb of God." So we do behold You. We behold You in Your weakness. You were slain for us. We behold You in Your great power, which

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assures us that You will complete in us all that You've begun. We give You praise and honor and glory. Amen.