

“Worthy is the Lamb”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 11

Texts: Revelation 5:1-14; Daniel 12:1-13

In Revelation 4 and 5 the apostle John is caught away by the Holy Spirit and given an amazing vision of God’s throne in heaven. The glory of the one sitting upon the throne, says John, has the appearance of precious gems and reflects virtually every color of the spectrum. A rainbow encircles the throne, from which emanate flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Surrounding the throne are twenty four elders, angelic beings representing God’s redeemed people in both testaments. They are present before the throne along with four living creatures who have six wings and who are covered with eyes. These creatures represent all of creation. Together with the elders, the living creatures worship the one seated on the throne. But they also worship another: the Lamb who was slain and who alone is worthy to open the mysterious scroll containing God’s plan for the final chapters of redemptive history. They sing a new song, “worthy is the Lamb.”

As we continue our series on the book of Revelation, we have come to the opening scenes of John’s second vision which are recorded for us in Revelation 4-5. Recall that in earlier chapters—Revelation 1:12-3:22—John was given a vision of the resurrected Christ walking in the midst of his churches. While this earlier vision depicts Christ’s presence with his church on the earth, John’s second vision in Revelation 4-5 is intended to give God’s people a heavenly perspective upon their earthly struggles. Like the Old Testament prophets Ezekiel, Daniel and Isaiah before him, John is caught away by the Holy Spirit and given a vision of God’s throne room in heaven. While the heavenly scene is in many ways beyond description, John’s vision is nevertheless designed to give comfort and encouragement to those Christians previously addressed by our Lord in his letters to the seven churches of western Asia Minor, those Christians to whom the Risen Christ had directed words of encouragement, admonition and promise.

While Christians on earth must face the slanderous accusations of those who oppose the gospel, while they struggle to avoid compromise with the spirit of the age, while they fight against those pagan influences surrounding them, and while they struggle against the Beast—which is the satanically inspired Roman government which was putting Christians to death who did not acknowledge the divinity of Caesar and which also prevented them from buying and selling—John now gives these same Christians a glimpse of heaven. The purpose of this vision is, no doubt, to remind Christians in the midst of their struggles against these earthly foes, that God’s will is being done in heaven, and that one day God’s will *will* be done upon the earth.

Indeed, the knowledge of this fact would have been of great encouragement to believers struggling to fight the good fight of faith under the most difficult of circumstances. Despite the apparent victory of the Beast in taking the lives of the saints, keeping the heavenly scene before our eyes should remind God’s people that despite the wrath of Satan against them, God’s people will be victorious, because on Calvary’s cross and in the garden tomb, the Lamb has already defeated the serpent. Therefore, in Revelation 4, John’s focus is upon the glory of the one who sits upon the throne, while in chapter five, the focus shifts to the Lamb who was slain and who alone is worthy to open the scroll. Not only is the Lamb worthy to do this, and not only has the Lamb already triumphed over Satan, but one day the Lamb’s triumph over Satan upon the cross will extend to all the earth. At the end of the redemptive drama, Satan and his henchmen will be cast into the lake of fire, never to torment God’s people again.

In many ways, Revelation 5 continues the vision of the heavenly throne begun in chapter four. But the focus now shifts from the glory of the one seated upon the throne and the elders and living creatures who attend to him, to the Lamb who is the only one worthy to open the scroll. With this in mind, let us turn to our text, Revelation chapter 5:1-14.

As I have already mentioned, the focus of John's vision shifts from the scene in the opening verses of chapter four in which all creation—represented by the four living creatures—praises the one seated on the throne, to the image of the representatives of the redeemed praising God (the twenty-four elders), to God's re-creation of all things as seen in Revelation 5:1-14.¹ We can see this pattern in the intensified focus upon the Lamb who not only redeems his people from sin and death, but who is also the one in whom all things will be re-created by virtue of his resurrection from the dead. The Lamb was slain, but now he is alive forevermore and he will make all things new. In this vision then the broad panorama of redemptive history—creation, fall, redemption, re-creation—is displayed in summary form. Because the Lamb alone is worthy, he will open the mysterious scroll and its seals, a subject which we will cover when we get to chapters 6-8 of the Book of Revelation.

This shift in emphasis from the one seated on the throne to the Lamb becomes clear in Revelation 5:1 when John reveals that the one upon the throne is holding something in his hand. According to John, *"Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals."* The first thing we should notice is that the scroll John sees has writing on both the front and the back. On the one hand, this reference is probably intended to remind us of the scroll the prophet Ezekiel had seen in the opening chapters of his prophetic vision. Because Ezekiel was to preach the contents written upon the scroll to the people of Israel, he was commanded to eat the scroll, a symbolic act pointing to his preparation to preach its contents.² But the scroll which John sees is sealed—and someone must be found who is worthy to open it. This sets in motion the great drama of this vision, John's lament that no one is worthy to do so.

Some historical background here is important. People living in John's day would have immediately grasped the significance of the fact that the scroll was sealed. Such scrolls often served two functions in the first century, official documents or a last will and testament. When an official document was sealed with wax, the seal was made with the author's official and personal mark, usually from his signet ring or his official seal, so as to ensure both the authenticity and the authority of the sealed document's contents. The seal not only ensured privacy, it ensured that only one who had recognized authority could open the document and read its contents. If the heavenly scroll is a last will and testament, this might explain the double-sided writing, which was a common Roman practice in legal documents. Furthermore, a will had to be witnessed and sealed by seven witnesses—the seven fold Spirit of God who is present before the throne. The terms of such wills could be executed only upon the death of the testator. In this case, the seven seals contained in the scroll are to be opened by the Lamb who was slain, and who by virtue of his death for his people is reckoned worthy to do so.³ Thus the Lamb is not only the author of this heavenly scroll, by virtue of his death, he alone is worthy to open it and execute its instructions.

¹ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 107.

² Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 103-104.

³ Beale, *Revelation*, 344-346.

But what is this mysterious scroll all about, and why is it that no one can be found who is worthy to open it? As we read in verses 2-4, this fact causes John great consternation. *“And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?’ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.”* As we have seen in our Old Testament lesson this morning, in verse 4 of Daniel 12, the angel tells Daniel, *“But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end.”* Despite the angel’s instructions, Daniel remains perplexed about the meaning of these matters and asks the angel beginning in verse 8: *“So I asked, ‘My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?’ He replied, ‘Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end. Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.’”* Those who are wise and who understand are the same ones whom Jesus says have been given ears to hear. And having been given ears to hear, it is time for the scroll to be opened and its contents to be revealed to God’s people who struggle upon the earth against the beast.

Daniel’s prophecy was to be sealed until the time of the end, because the Old Testament saints could not have possibly understood how God would bring about the blessings of the messianic age without a direct knowledge of the person and work of Jesus Christ. But with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ now accomplished facts, the time of the end has finally come. Once Jesus Christ conquers death and the grave, human history now enters into its final phase. Therefore, it is indeed time for that which was sealed in Daniel’s day until the time of the end to be revealed. And so with the coming of Christ some seven hundred years after Daniel, that which was sealed will now be opened. But we still have not answered the critical questions, “what is on this scroll and why is no one able to open it?” If we answer the former question, we will also be able to answer the latter.

Given the fact that the scroll in Ezekiel’s vision had to do with God’s covenant promises to his people, and given the fact that Daniel’s prophecy which was sealed until the time of end has to do with the resurrection from the dead and the redemption and purification of God’s saints, we have every reason to believe that the scroll mentioned in John’s vision describes events which are associated with the final chapters of redemptive history. The main theme of the Book of Revelation is about God and his glory, and God’s glory is made manifest for all to see through the redemption accomplished by the Lamb.

Furthermore, we need to keep in mind the big picture of the redemptive story. God promised that Adam would reign over the earth if he obeyed the terms of the covenant of works—“do this and you shall live.” Adam did not and as a result of eating from the forbidden tree plunged the entire human race into sin and death, bringing God’s curse down upon all creation. Jesus Christ, therefore, came as the Second Adam, the one who will undo the damage wrought upon the human race by the fall. So, the scroll must contain information about how this final redemption of all things will come to pass. The scroll, therefore, contains the record of future things which must take place so that God’s will is done upon the earth.

Like all of God’s dealings with man, the contents of the scroll must be covenantal, because the things to be revealed will not only tell God’s people about God’s dominion over all the earth and his promised covenantal inheritance for all of his people, the scroll will reveal details of God’s judgment upon all those who have broken his covenant and who are under his curse. The themes of blessing and curse reappear yet again, and so we can safely assume that the scroll is the covenant declaration (or testament) of the Lamb, specifically as to how God will bring all of redemptive history to its glorious and final climax. This had been given to Daniel, but the angel commanded it to be sealed until the time of the end.

Since the scroll contains information about the final chapters of redemptive history, it can only be opened by a human, since all of the promises contained in it are related to God's promise of a redeemed people. Because of human sin, no one is worthy to open the scroll. Only Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain and who is both God and man, is able to earn the promised inheritance by fulfilling what God demands of his people under the covenant of works and their restatement in the Ten Commandments. This explains why it is that only Jesus Christ is worthy to open the scroll, and that no one else is.⁴ For he alone has kept God's law perfectly and is without sin. As for the reason as to why John weeps about the possibility of the scroll remaining sealed, God's people will not have access to its contents unless it is opened.⁵ But once the seal is opened, God's people are permitted to see God's purposes for the final chapters of redemptive history. Therefore even in the midst of their earthly struggles and war with the beast, they will see and understand that God has a purpose for everything which come to pass and that God's will cannot be thwarted, despite the wrath of the beast who wages war upon the saints.⁶ God's eternal decree will come to pass. His will *will* be done

So it is glorious news to John when, according to verse 5, "*one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.'*" Not only is Jesus worthy to open the scroll, the elder goes on to describe the Lamb in terms of his messianic glory. Jesus is the lion of Judah foretold in Genesis 49:10. Jesus is the root of David predicted in Isaiah 11. In his resurrection from the dead he has triumphed over humanity's greatest enemy, death and the grave! Therefore, because Jesus has fulfilled the glorious messianic prophecies which speak of God's chosen one overcoming his enemies and then exercising his judgment upon them, Jesus alone is worthy to open the scroll and its seals.

The language used here by John is important. Christ's triumph is not something which lies ahead in the distant future at his Second Advent, but because of the cross and the empty tomb, Christ's victory over Satan is already an accomplished fact. With the unsealing of the scroll, the time has now come for the Conquering One to execute his righteous judgments on behalf of his people.⁷ And the nature of these righteous judgments will be revealed when the seals are opened and when Christ's victory over Satan is explained in the following chapters.

Having heard the declaration of the elder, John now describes what happens next. As he puts it in verse 6, "*Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.'*" Not only do the elders and living creatures worship him who sits upon the throne, they also worship the Lamb. The fact that he is the Lamb who was slain, not only ties his redemptive work to all of God's covenant promises made throughout redemptive history, such as events like the Passover and the shedding of the blood of sacrificial animals, but as Isaiah prophesied of God's suffering servant, he is like a sheep who was lead to the slaughter. Ironically, then, the Lamb conquers by dying, and this very important point explains why it is that unless we are granted understanding of these mysteries by the Holy Spirit, and "given ears to hear," so to speak, the things in

⁴ Beale, Revelation, 340-342.

⁵ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 105.

⁶ Beale, Revelation, 342.

⁷ Beale, Revelation, 350.

this book will remain utterly mysterious to us.⁸ Apart from the eyes and ears of faith, it is impossible to understand that Christ's ultimate victory must come through his death and resurrection.

John also describes the Lamb as follows: *"He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth."* The image of horns suggests the idea of conquest. And since the number "seven" when used in the Book of Revelation symbolizes perfection of fullness, the seven horns indicates the fullness of his triumph over death and the grave. John's reference to the Lamb's seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God are images drawn once again from the third and fourth chapters of the prophecy of Zechariah. The seven lamps and the seven eyes of Zechariah's prophecy are Old Testament pictures of the blessed Holy Spirit who is omnipotent and all-powerful. Before the dawn of the messianic age, the seven-fold spirit appears before the throne, but now after the conquest of the Lamb and the dawn of the new creation, the blessed Holy Spirit now goes out to the ends of the earth to execute God's sovereign decree. In this, John sees the spread of the kingdom of God unto the ends of the earth, and the fact that the Holy Spirit will empower Christ's church to preach the gospel as the means by which Christ's kingdom will advance.

Since he is declared to be worthy to open the scroll the Lamb came *"and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne."* The echo here from Daniel 7:13-14 is unescapable. Says Daniel, *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."* John and Daniel are describing the same scene. The fact that the Lamb is worthy, enables him to approach God's throne and open the scroll and its seals which will demonstrate his authority and power over all the earth and to establish that kingdom which shall never be destroyed. And when the Lamb draws near to the one seated upon the throne, heaven worships him.

According to John, *"when [the Lamb] had taken [the scroll], the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints."* There are a number of important things here. For one thing, the Lamb possesses the same glory and authority as does the one sitting on the throne. When heaven worships the Lamb, they are worshipping God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. The Lamb's majesty and glory are clearly equal to that of the one seated on the throne. No mere creature could ever possess such glory. It is nothing less than the glory of God. Furthermore, the elders who represent the redeemed and the living creatures who represent creation fall before the Lamb and worship him. This also points us to the fact that Christ's glory and worthiness is equal to that of the father's, for the hosts of heaven would never bow before any creature or any created thing.

Later on, in the Book of Revelation, we will read that the prayers of the saints rise to heaven. In Revelation 6:9-11 and 8:4 the saints pray for vindication of martyred believers. They cry out for judgment upon the ungodly. The fact that these prayers ascend to God's throne and to the Lamb reminds us that the opening of the scroll is somehow connected their vindication. The judgments yet to come and contained in the scroll will, in part, bring about the vindication of the saints.

With the elders holding harps in their hands and singing, the scene in heaven is suddenly reminiscent of

⁸ Beale, Revelation, 354.

the Levitical priests who were commissioned to lead the people in the praise and worship of YHWH. *And they sang a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.'*"

Throughout the Old Testament, a new song is sung as an expression of praise to God for granting his people victory over their enemies. Given the worthiness of the Lamb who was slain, the new song commemorates Christ's victory over sin and death and the inauguration of the new creation. The words of the hymn clearly express this. Jesus has died for his chosen ones and in doing so purchased a people from every tribe, language, people and nation. The king is vested with an everlasting kingdom which extends to the ends of the earth and encompasses his elect from every nation. Because Jesus has conquered death and the grave, all of his people participate in his kingdom rule by virtue of the new creation, specifically the new birth in Christ, which John will later call "the first resurrection." All those who are Christ's are said to reign with him because death has no hold upon them. The Beast may kill them, but they will reign with Christ nevertheless. And then when Christ comes back at the end of the age, God's people will rule indeed with him upon the renewed heaven and earth in the age to come.

When the new song of redemption is sung, the whole of heaven worships the Lamb. According to John, *"Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders."* These are the angels and legions of heaven who return to earth with Christ on the day of judgment. But before the dreadful day of judgment, they worship the Lamb along with the elders and living creatures. *"In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!'"*

This wonderful scene points ahead to a great and glorious day yet to come. For as the chapter and its focus upon the Lamb comes to a close, John's vision of the throne is extended from the present to the time of the end, when universal acclaim is offered to Christ by a redeemed creation at the end of the age.⁹ *"Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!' The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshiped."* John not only sees the worship of the Lamb in the present, he also sees that worship of the Lamb by a redeemed creation which takes place at the end of time.

Therefore, the vision of the heavenly throne ends with all of creation and all of God's redeemed worshipping the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb. When Daniels' vision was sealed, when Ezekiel and Isaiah saw the throne, their visions were incomplete because they did not see the Lamb who was slain. For it is only *after* Christ has come, only *after* he has died for our sins, only *after* he was raised for our justification, that we can fully understand the meaning of the new song. For the new song centers upon what God has done in Christ to free us from our sins, to make us a kingdom of priests and to ensure that one day we will rule with Christ upon a redeemed earth.

And so in the midst of our earthly struggles, let us always keep John's vision before our eyes, knowing that even as God's will is being done in heaven, one day it will be done upon the earth. And until it is, let

⁹ Beale, Revelation, 365.

us add our voices to those of the multitude in heaven. “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!” Amen!