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 Revelation 5:1-14
 Eleventh Message
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WORTHY IS THE LAMB

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Of the writing of books about Revelation there is no end. On my shelf I have about forty of them, but this is just a small fraction of what has been published. If you ask people what Revelation is about, many would say it is about the Great Tribulation, Armageddon, and the Millennium. Many books foster this understanding, for example, Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and currently the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.¹

But other books about Revelation have completely different titles. Here are a few from my shelf: Richard Brooks' *The Lamb is all the Glory*, Dennis Johnson's *Triumph of the Lamb*, Craig Koester's *Revelation and the End of All Things*, whose cover art makes it clear that this end is the worship of the Lamb, and Robert Coleman's *Singing with the Angels*.²

So different are these two sets of titles that it is natural to wonder if the authors are reading the same book. The first set of books focuses on what happens on earth. The second set focuses more attention on what happens in heaven. The events of Revelation unfold on these two planes, heaven and earth. But which is the more important arena? Where does the real action take place? Are the descriptions of heaven merely an inconvenient interruption to the much more interesting events on earth? Or is it the events in heaven that give meaning to what happens on earth? Those of you who have followed my series so far should know by now what I think of those questions.

Nowhere are these questions more important than in chapters 4-5. The first group of authors pay relatively little attention to these two chapters, except to note that the Rapture occurs at the beginning of chapter 4—the Church is removed from earth so that it does not endure the Great Tribulation. They then rush on to chapter 6 to look at the seven seals. The second group recognizes that the seals, trumpets and bowls are always set in context with a vision of the heavenly throne room and of the worship that takes place around the throne.

The first approach to Revelation tends to breed either fascination or fear—fascination with timetables, or fear over the awful events that unfold. God and Christ tend to get lost in the excitement. The second approach leads to doxology, to praise and worship offered to the one seated upon the throne and to the Lamb.

The Scroll

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. 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. (Rev 5:1-4 NIV)

The setting of chapter 5 is the same as for chapter 4, the heavenly throne room. In chapter 4 John saw a throne in heaven and one seated upon it. Now he sees that God is holding a scroll in his right

hand. The scroll is a repeated image in the Old Testament prophets. Sometimes a prophet was told to write God's prophetic word on a scroll. Sometimes the prophet saw a scroll containing God's word. In either case, the contents of the scroll are always a word of judgment. The closest parallel is to Ezekiel who saw a scroll written on both sides with words of lament, mourning and woe (Ezek 2:10).

John sees that the scroll is in God's hand. God has determined that judgment should happen. Why? We saw last week that Revelation is about both the things which are now and the things which must happen after this (1:1, 19; 4:1; 22:6). The world as it is now is out of order. The earth is in rebellion against God. In the imagery of Revelation, the dragon has installed the beast upon his earthly throne, and the false prophet has deceived mankind into worshipping the beast rather than God. But God is on his throne, and he declares that certain things must happen soon.

God could have chosen to just zap things into order, an act which theologians describe as *deus ex machina*. But God has chosen not to work this way. This is not due to any lack of power or ability on his part. For reasons of his own, hidden within his own inscrutable purposes, God chooses to work through his servants. Who is the servant through whom God will set things right, the servant through whom he will bring judgment upon his enemies and thereby complete the salvation of his people? John sees that the scroll is sealed with seven seals. The things that must happen soon cannot happen until those seals are broken. But who can open them?

John sees an angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scrolls?" Who can bring about the unfolding of God's purposes? Alas, there is no one worthy. There is no one on earth: those on earth with power are opposed to God; those who long for God have no power. There is no one under the earth: the residents of the underworld provoke and lead the rebellion against God. There is not even anyone above the earth: even the angels are not equal to the task. Indeed 1 Pet 1:10-12 suggests that even the angels did not know the long-term referent of Old Testament prophecy. The angels did not know how God was going to fulfill his oracles of judgment and salvation. God did not reveal to them how he would simultaneously judge and remove evil on the one hand, and save his people on the other hand.

John weeps. His hopes had been raised in seeing the scroll: God would put things right. But, seeing no one able to unlock the scroll, his hopes are dashed. How then will God accomplish his purposes? How will he set things right?

The Lion

Then 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." (5:5)

John is not allowed to weep for long. One of the twenty-four elders urges him to dry his tears so that he can look. There is one who is able to open the scroll and its seven seals. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David can do so because he has triumphed. The elder ties together two Messianic titles from the Old Testament.

When Jacob pronounced his blessing upon his sons, he likened Judah to a lion:

**“You are a lion’s cub, O Judah;
you return from the prey, my son.
Like a lion he crouches and lies down,
like a lioness—who dares rouse him.
The scepter will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,
until he comes to whom it belongs
and the obedience of the nations is his.” (Gen 49:9-10)**

Jacob refers to two aspects of the lion: his power in devouring prey, and his regal authority. Even in English we refer to the regal lion, calling him the king of the beasts. This imagery of the lion remained linked to the tribe of Judah. Even today, the crest of the city of Jerusalem features a lion. The second title is drawn from Isaiah, who foretold,

**A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit...**

In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. (Isa 11:1, 10)

Today is Palm Sunday. The Jews of Jesus’ day were longing for God to send his Messiah. This Messiah would be great David’s greater son, a mighty king who would go into battle, overthrow Israel’s enemies, and restore her to the greatness befitting her identity as the people of God. On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Matt 21:9; cf. Mark 11:9-10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13). The crowd wanted a lion to throw off the power of Rome.

The Lamb

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. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. (5:6-7)

John looks, expecting to see the Lion, but instead he sees a Lamb. The juxtaposition of what John hears and what he sees indicates an identity between the two. The Lion of whom he hears is in fact the Lamb whom he sees. What a juxtaposition of images: a conquering lion and a slain lamb. Herein lies a great paradox. John is told that the Lion has triumphed and conquered. But that victory has been accomplished through the Lamb being slain. God has made his power manifest through weakness.

Why was the Lamb slain? The Old Testament has pointed towards this image. Each year the Israelites slew a lamb on Passover, to remember that God had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. God had accomplished a great victory over Pharaoh, the tyrannical ruler that held God’s people in captivity. On account of the slain blood of the Passover lamb, the Lord passed over his people, protecting them

from his judgment. God graciously accepted the vicarious death of an animal sacrifice in place of the Israelites’ firstborn sons. Having brought his people into freedom, God provided the sacrificial system, graciously accepting the vicarious death of animal sacrifices as providing atonement for sin.

Within the context of Revelation the Lamb was slain for his faithful witness to God. He is the archetypal martyr. In chapter 10, John again sees a scroll. The mystery of this scroll, as revealed in chapter 11, concerns two witnesses. How will the deception of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet be unmasked? How will their tyrannical rule be brought to an end? How will the death of the saints be vindicated? Not by acting like a lion, but by acting like a lamb. The witnesses follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Like Jesus, they are killed for their faithful witness. But just as they followed Jesus into death, they also follow him through death into new life. Similarly, the saints are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, bearing faithful witness. They are to expect death, but are also assured of following Jesus through death into new life. Sadly, too often the Church has behaved like a lion, even sometimes ironically carrying the banner of the Lamb and Flag into its battles.

From here on, “the Lamb” will be John’s favorite title for Jesus, a title he uses 28 times, or four times seven. We are never allowed to forget that there is a throne in heaven with one seated upon it. Nor are we allowed to forget that Jesus is the Lamb.

John sees the Lamb approach God and take the scroll from his right hand. With a huge sigh of relief we now await the opening of the seals. This is what you have all been waiting for! What are these seven seals? But, wait, we are not yet shown the opening of the seals. Before the Lamb opens the first seal John is shown something of great importance. Before the judgments upon earth which the seals unleash, John is shown something further in heaven. There is an interlude between the initial sight of the seven seals and the opening of the first seal. Similarly, there will be an interlude between the initial sight of the seven trumpets (8:2) and the blowing of the first trumpet (8:7), and an interlude between the initial sight of the seven plagues (15:1) and the pouring out of the first plague from the first bowl (16:2). These interludes are of great importance. In each case the interlude shows events in heaven which provide context for the terrifying judgments upon earth. The judgments upon earth are terrifying indeed, but we are never allowed to forget that they proceed from God’s throne around which God’s people are gathered in worship.

Worship of the Lamb

The interlude between the sight of the seven seals and the breaking of the first seal is filled with the worship of the Lamb. The response of the creatures in heaven to the Lamb taking the scroll is not to pick up their timetables in order to try to figure out the timing of the seals. No, their response is to fall down and worship. In chapter 4 we had two songs of worship addressed to the one seated upon the throne. Now in chapter 5 we have two songs of worship addressed to the Lamb, followed by a song addressed to both.

1. The Lamb is worthy to receive the scroll

And when he had taken it, 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. 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.” (5:8-10)

The immediate response of the cherubim and the elders to the sight of the Lamb taking the scroll from the one seated upon the throne is to fall down in worship and sing a new song. The new song indicates a new redemptive act by God, which brings forth a new song of praise from his people. They proclaim that the Lamb is worthy to take the scroll. He is able to unlock the mystery of God’s will, the mystery whereby God will bring to pass the things which must happen. He is able to do so not because of his power, but because he was slain. Revelation shows that the world is populated by men and women of every tribe, nation, language and people, a four-fold phrase that is used seven times in various combinations. Though these people be in rebellion against God, he does not abandon them. He is plundering the domain of Satan, who holds every tribe, nation, language and people captive, in order to assemble around his throne saints from every tribe, nation, language and people. And the means he uses is the blood of the slain Lamb.

2. The Lamb is worthy to receive praise

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. 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!” (5:11-12)**

Next John sees myriad upon myriad of angels adding their chorus. The cherubim and elders acclaimed the Lamb as worthy to receive the scroll. The angels intensify the worship, acclaiming him as worthy to receive praise. Their seven-fold attribution indicates that nothing is held back. God is worthy to receive glory and praise because he is the Creator. The Lamb is worthy to receive glory and praise because he is the Redeemer.

Handel used this song as the great climax to *Messiah*. In the Amen which follows, Handel has the choir join in sequentially: first the basses, then the tenors, then the altos, and finally the sopranos, until all are singing “Amen” to the cry, “Worthy is the Lamb.” What a fitting climax.

3. The Lamb is worshiped with God

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!” (5:13)**

Every creature in every realm joins in, offering their worship to both the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb. This worship that is jointly offered shows just how extraordinary is the worship of this chapter. Revelation always maintains a clear distinction between the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb. Yet it is also clear that worship is offered to both. The early church continued Judaism’s insistence on monotheism. Yet from the earliest days the Church worshiped Jesus without feeling that it was sacrificing monotheism. There is only one God, but Father and Son are together worshiped.

The worship of Jesus is not something the early church would have done lightly. This is a profound mystery. It would not be until the fourth and fifth centuries that this would be worked out theologically in the doctrines of the Trinity and of the full deity of Jesus. It would not be until the fourth ecumenical council at Chalcedon in 451 that the Church would complete its process of defining the identity of Jesus. But here in Revelation we have a very high Christology, a very high understanding of the person of Jesus. The Lamb is not one of the worshipers. He is worshiped. There could be no more powerful statement of the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

4. The cherubim’s Amen

The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped. (5:14)

The four cherubim round out the chorus of praise by adding their “Amen.” It was they who commenced the worship in 4:8, and it is they who bring it to a close. They are the throne attendants of God, the innermost circle of the worshipers gathered around the throne.

The Lamb and the Communion Table

Two weeks ago I went to Belgium to see a piece of art. Though it is one of my favorite pieces of religious art I had never seen it in real life. What is today known as the Ghent Altarpiece was painted in the 1420s by the van Eyck brothers for the altar of a chapel in what is today St Bavo’s cathedral in Ghent. The altarpiece was designed to stand behind the altar. It is a triptych, consisting of two doors which close over a central section. Normally the altarpiece would be closed, showing panels of muted color. These panels portray, among other things, Old Testament prophets who foretold the Messiah, and the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary.

On feast days the altarpiece would be opened, revealing a dozen brilliantly-colored panels. The central panel is known as the Adoration of the Lamb. At the center is the Lamb standing on the altar. Blood flows from his breast into the communion chalice that stands on the altar. Around the altar kneel angels. Beyond the circle of the angels are four groups of people, all gazing upon the Lamb. At front left the Old Testament prophets kneel in front of a great company of people drawn from every nation, indicated by their many different hats. At the front right the New Testament apostles kneel in front of church martyrs, indicated by their red robes. At the back left, waving palm branches as they approach the altar, are the confessors, the faithful saints whose death was not due to martyrdom. At the back right, also waving palm branches and approaching the altar, are the women saints and martyrs. On four adjacent panels, four additional groups process toward the altar. From the left come the just judges and the knights of Christ; they stood faithfully for Christ in the world. From the right approach the hermits and the pilgrims; they faithfully followed Christ by withdrawing from the world. These four groups are journeying towards the altar, there to join those already gathered around the altar, worshiping the Lamb standing as though slain. Above them the heavenly angels offer their worship, the singers on the left, the musicians on the right.

The altarpiece is a marvelous portrayal of Revelation 5. On festival days, Mass would be observed in front of the opened altarpiece. We do not share the Catholic understanding of the Mass as a repeated sacrifice of the Lamb. Nevertheless, this is a marvelous piece of art for the communion table. It is a powerful reminder that the slain Lamb whose blood fills the communion cup is also now receiving the worship of the saints above and below.

In a few minutes we will take communion. This is an act of remembrance, as we remember Christ's death: the Lamb was slain for us. It is an act of proclamation, as we proclaim Christ's death until he comes. Through sharing in the symbols of Christ's broken body and shed blood we proclaim that the triumph of the Lion is accomplished through the slaughter of the Lamb. It is an act of worship as we offer our thanks: we thank God that he has accepted the slaughter of the Lamb in our place, and we acclaim the Lamb as worthy of our adoration because he was slain.

Before we come to the communion table we will add our chorus to that of the cherubim, the elders, the angels and all creation, who are gathered around the throne and the altar. Revelation 4-5 contains five stanzas of worship: two addressed to God, two addressed to the Lamb, and the fifth addressed to both. James Boice, late pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, worked these into a five-stanza hymn, *'Round the Throne in Radiant Glory*. As we prepare to sing this, I urge you to ensure that your understanding of Revelation be doxological. If Revelation doesn't make you want to join Handel in singing, "Worthy is the Lamb," then perhaps you have a wrong understanding of the book.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Rev 1:5b-6).

1. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1995) and subsequent volumes.

2. Richard Brooks, *The Lamb is All the Glory* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1986); Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001); Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Robert E. Coleman, *Singing With the Angels* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1998; originally published as *Songs of Heaven* [Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1980]).

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