

Worthy is the Lamb

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This week's bible reading is from Revelation chapter 5 verses 1 -10.

Introduction

Revelation is a book many Christians generally stay away from, for a number of reasons. Firstly it's so very different in style and language from the rest of the NT. Secondly it's full of quite bizarre and sometimes disturbing imagery. And thirdly, - in many places - it's quite difficult to make much sense of. But ignoring the book of Revelation for these reasons, would be a mistake.

We're all aware that very serious things are going on in the world, and most of it isn't good - and I'm not just talking about the covid pandemic. Long before covid the world was already struggling with wars, violence and terror; famine, oppression and poverty, to name just a few of the global problems we face. Yes, the world is in quite a mess. But does anyone have the solution? Does God? Does He even care?

Well that's where the Book of Revelation comes in, because – at one very important level – Revelation is about how God is going to deal with the world and its mess; it's about how He will bring things to a final conclusion. I'll come back to this again shortly. But first let's take a look at verse one of our reading. John said:

“Then I saw in the right hand of him who sits on the throne, a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.”

The Scroll

This scroll that God is holding in His hand, is His plan; His end game for dealing with the problem of sinful humanity. With the events described in this scroll, God will finally bring history to an end. The reason this is important, is because it means that everything will ultimately play out according to God's Will. And the rest of the book of Revelation from here on, gives us insight into the contents of the scroll, and details the events that will take place as God's plan unfolds. Some of the events in Revelation have already taken place; others are yet to happen, whilst others are still very much a mystery.

The main point here, is that God has already seen the end of this world; He already knows what is going to happen - for He has ordained it. However, there is a problem because the scroll is sealed, and God's Will cannot come to pass unless someone can be found who is able to open the scroll and read it - but it cannot be opened by just anyone.

The number of seals (seven) indicates profound secrecy and only the most exalted person can open this scroll to set God's plan in motion – a plan that will finally bring this world to an end. But who is worthy? Who can open this scroll? A powerful angel calls for someone to come forward. But no one could be found, and so John weeps.

If the scroll is not opened, then God's plan to bring this world to an end cannot be implemented. Now you might be thinking, "well surely that's a good thing - the world not coming to an end." From a limited human perspective, yes. But the fact is, this world's fate was sealed the moment that Adam and Eve sinned. Far better it come to an end according to God's Will, than anybody else's. Because in God's plan, the sinful, the faithless and the godless will be confronted and judged. Jesus will be fully vindicated before the whole earth, and so will all His followers. So the importance of this Scroll cannot be overstated.

The Lion and the Lamb

As John continues to weep, one of the 24 elders who sit around the throne, speaks to him, saying:

"Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, ...has triumphed - He is able to open the scroll."

The title "Lion of Judah" harks back to Genesis 49 and was an accepted reference to the Messiah. So John, when he turns and looks is probably expecting to see a great and powerful warrior; a mighty conquering hero, victorious in battle. Instead, what he sees is:

"a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain" (v6)

Seeing the Slain Lamb instead of a powerful lion is a shock, and needs some explanation. Now "The Lamb" is a highly significant figure in Revelation, occurring 32 times, but the title "Lamb of God" is used only twice in the rest of the Bible (both in John's Gospel) so we need to try and understand this. Instead of a mighty warrior, the Messiah is depicted as a wounded figure of suffering. He bears not just the scars of battle, but seems to have received a fatal blow.

This is a powerful image here - the Lion of Judah has become a sacrificial lamb. Jesus has overcome yes, but not by killing His enemies, but by being killed, and rising again - thus conquering death itself. The image of the Slain Lamb is used to great theological effect, for it combines both death and resurrection. The Lamb is slain - yet is standing before the Throne of God very much alive. Contained in this one image then is the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension of Jesus.

Apocalyptic Imagery

The lamb John sees is no ordinary lamb; because it has seven horns and seven eyes – classic apocalyptic imagery. It's important of course that we don't take these things literally, the images are symbolic and represent important truths.

The horn represents 'strength' and the number seven in Jewish culture is the 'perfect' number, and therefore the seven horns represent perfect strength, power and authority - wielded by the Lamb. Similarly, the seven eyes represent wisdom and Jesus' ability to see all things, in heaven and on earth; nothing escapes His notice and His knowledge is complete. It is then, this all-powerful, all-seeing, all-knowing, victorious, resurrected Lamb, who takes the scroll from the Father's hand.

The beginning of the End

But why does any of this matter? Well, the answer is simple – this Lamb is the one we worship. This Lamb is the one we call Lord; the one we have chosen to follow and commit our lives to. And it's by His death and His blood that we are saved (v9). And now, not just your life or mine, but the fate of the whole world is in His hands. That's why this matters.

Jesus' story didn't end with the crucifixion and the resurrection. Because in this vision John was shown what happened after Jesus ascended into heaven. And, following His victory on the Cross, only He can open this scroll; He alone is worthy. For His name, His glory, His power, is above all others. For all authority in heaven and on Earth, has been given to Him (cf. Matt 28:18). And that's important, especially in this day and age. Make sure your faith is in the right person.

Heavenly Worship

Once the Lamb takes the Scroll, the 24 Elders and the Four Living Creatures, all bow down and worship the Lamb. This act of worship symbolizes the "Enthronement of the Lamb", because from this point on in Revelation, the Father no-longer sits alone on the Throne, the Lamb is with Him and the Lamb is worshipped as God.

As John's vision widens, he sees the whole of creation united in praise and worship of the lamb. This stands in stark contrast to the present situation here on Earth, where the Church struggles to survive in a secular world that is so hostile to its teaching and message. Christ's Church is both mocked and persecuted. Yet this vision offers us a sign of great hope.

From a purely human perspective, the worship of Jesus Sunday by Sunday may seem like a rather futile gesture in the midst of such a strong, secular culture, but from heaven's perspective, the worship we offer week by week, is precious and meaningful, and our prayers are as incense before God (verse 8 of our reading). Worship, when offered in the midst of unbelieving people, is seen as an act of resistance against the powerful secular forces of the prevailing culture – and that does not go unnoticed by God. Amen.