

Series Revelation

This Message #11 Revelation 5:1-14

In chapter 4 we thought about the majesty of God the Father. The Apostle John saw, in a very indistinct and imprecise way, a throne on which was sitting “the Lord God Almighty,” the One “who was, and is, and is to come,” who “lives for ever and ever.” Praise was offered to Him by two groups of heavenly beings, identified as “Elders” and “Living Creatures.” The One on the throne was worshipped because He created and sustained all things.

Chapters 4 and 5 are one continuous vision, but the focus shifts from the Father to the exalted Lord Jesus. What John saw was similar to the vision given to Daniel in the Old Testament. Let me read what Daniel described: “Thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of this head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated and the books were opened.” Those words are similar to Revelation chapter 4.

A few verses later, Daniel added these words: “In my vision ... 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 worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (*Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14*). Those words describe very well what we are going to read in chapter 5.

Read Revelation 5:1-14

John undoubtedly recognized that he was seeing the same event about which Daniel had written. At the conclusion of his visions Daniel was told to “close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end” (*Daniel 12:4*). John was informed that his vision concerned things that would take place in the future and therefore he would have assumed that the scroll in the hand of the One who was sitting on the throne contained information about end time events.

In the 1st Century, scrolls were typically made of strips of papyrus which were glued end to end to form one long continuous roll, as much as 30 feet long. Normally only one side was used for writing. When the writing of a document was completed, the scroll was rolled up and sealed with wax. An impression from a signet ring or stamp was made in the wax by the owner. Only the owner was qualified to give permission for the seal to be broken and the writing to be made known. This was the common way for contracts, last wills and testaments, and other legal documents to be handled.

The scroll in the Father's hand was unique because it had writing on both sides and it was sealed with 7 seals. The amount of writing suggests that the scroll contained a lot of detailed information. The seven seals suggest that the information was of greatest secrecy and importance. Also the number "seven" is used many times in this book to denote perfection and completeness.

John did not immediately explain the contents of the scroll, but there is little doubt about what was inscribed in it. The scroll contained the script that God was going to follow in bringing human history to its conclusion. Information reported by John in later chapters will confirm to us that God had a detailed plan to overcome evil, judge Satan and evildoers, restore and reestablish the heavens and earth, and to reward those individuals who had followed the ways of righteousness.

Generally speaking, the information in the scroll can be divided into two main categories: first, the establishment of the eternal kingdom of God and the privileges granted to the people who will be members of that kingdom; and second, the judgment of the political, economic, and religious systems of the world and the people who are part of those systems. These two categories are reflected in the title we have given to these messages: "The Victory of Christ and His Church Over Satan and the World."

Later in this book, there is a statement about "the mystery of God" being accomplished (*Revelation 10:7; cf 11:15*). Some parts of this "mystery" were revealed to the prophets in the Old Testament. They taught about the sovereignty of God and His expectations about how people were to live in holiness and righteousness. They prophesied about the Messiah.

In the New Testament era, many more details of God's plans were revealed to the writers of the Gospels and to the apostles. For example, it was the privilege of the Apostle Paul to explain mysteries about believers and the Church. He wrote that believers were "chosen in Christ before the creation of the world, ... had been predestined to be adopted as God's sons through Jesus Christ, ... have received redemption through the blood of Christ," and were "marked in Christ" with "the Holy Spirit" (*Ephesians 1:4-8, 13*). Concerning the Church, Paul explained that it was "through the church that the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Ephesians 3:10-11*).

The scroll in the hand of the One who was on the throne contained another aspect of the "mystery of God," in particular, how He was going to purge the universe of sin and evil and once again dwell among His people. In both the Old and New Testaments there are numerous prophecies about the judgment facing evildoers and the blessing for those who were being saved, but nothing as detailed as information written in the scroll. The scroll contained information about the consummation of history.

The problem at the beginning of chapter 5 was that "no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll." The crux of the matter was articulated by the mighty angel. "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" he asked. It was so tightly sealed that no created being could gain access to its information. This made John very sad. To him it meant that justice for believers and judgments against evildoers would not happen. John had been brought into heaven so that he could be shown what would take place in the future, but without a qualified individual to open the scroll, it seemed to him that nothing was going to happen.

Fortunately one of the Elders was aware of the solution and calmed John's fears. There was no need for sorrow, said the Elder, because an "overcomer," One who had "triumphed" and "gained a victory," had appeared on the scene. The word "triumphed," in verse 5, is the same word Jesus used in the letters to the church fellowships in chapters 2 and 3 to encourage church members to be faithful and be "overcomers."

The “overcomer” was announced to John by means of two Messianic titles. The first title, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” refers back to Genesis 49. When Jacob was blessing his sons, he said to Judah, “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 to 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” (*Genesis 49:9-10*). The figure of a lion was used about 150 times in the Old Testament to represent power and strength. Yahweh Himself was sometimes depicted as a lion warrior. From the passage in Genesis, the Jews determined that the Messiah would be a powerful king.

From Isaiah chapter 11, it was determined that the Messiah would be an offspring of David. “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit,” and, “With righteousness he shall judge the needy, and with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth; He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked,” and, a few verses later, “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples” (*Isaiah 11:1, 4, 10*). From these verses it was affirmed that the Messiah would be a king, able to conquer and destroy the enemies of Israel and deliver God’s people from their afflictions.

John expected to see a powerful king-like individual stepping up to the throne, but when he looked, he saw a Lamb. The Lamb appeared as if it had been slain, yet it was standing near the Father’s throne, very much alive. Verse 6 is the centerpiece of this chapter. There is much on which to reflect. It is a verse of seemingly mixed-up metaphors: the powerful, overcoming lion is really a lamb. We know from the previous books of the New Testament that Jesus did not overcome sin, evil, and death by his physical and divine abilities, but through the meek, compliant, and submissive sacrifice of Himself

From scripture we understand that Jesus laid aside His divine attributes and authority, left His place in the heavenly realms, and “assumed the form of a servant, being made in human likeness, ... humbled himself and became obedient to death” so that “through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (*Philippians 2:6-8; Hebrews 2:14-15*).

Jesus came to earth to be a sacrificial lamb, whose shed blood provided substitutionary atonement for the sins of humanity, just as the blood of sacrificial lambs in the Old Testament provided a covering for the sins of faithful worshipers.

Winning by submitting. Overcoming by dying. For Jesus the way up was first the way down. The worthiness of Jesus was the result of His incarnation and obedience unto death. Jesus faced many battles during His earthly life — temptation, opposition of religious leaders, demons, the injustice of the Roman and Jewish legal systems, physical suffering, and crucifixion. The greatest battle in all of human history was won by Him on the cross. Through all of those circumstances, He came forth victorious. His ministry on earth was completely successful. He fulfilled every requirement of the Father. Just before He bowed His head and released His physical life, He was able to declare His victory, “It is finished” (*John 19:30*).

The mission and ministry of Jesus disclosed something that was not previously understood about the mystery of God’s ways — that the Messiah had a twofold role. First, He had to come in humility and meekness to suffer and die. Then, and only then, would He be given the power and authority to set right the problems within creation — the problems of sin and death, and broken relationships between God and mankind.

The fact that the reigning King had to first be a crucified Savior was not grasped by people in the Old Testament era. Fortunately, this fact became clear in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul summed up the New Testament teaching when he wrote, “With all wisdom and understanding, the Father made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment, to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (*Ephesians 1:8b-10*).

And that brings us back to the book of Revelation and the scroll in the Father’s hand. The Lamb “came and took the scroll from the hand of Him who sat on the throne.” The Greek verbs used here convey a dramatic action: “He went up and took it.” The Lamb was able to enter into the presence of the Father. He marched past the Elders and then the Living Creatures, those who were responsible to protect the holiness of the Father. He ascended to the Father and took charge of the document which contained the eternal purposes and plans of the Father.

By releasing the scroll to the Lamb, the Father was transferring His power and authority to the Lamb. It would be the responsibility of the Lamb to carry out the Father's plans for the remainder of human history. Jesus had actually anticipated this. On one occasion, when He was confronted by His Jewish critics, He said, "The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. ... The Father has given him authority to judge because He is the Son of Man" (*John 5:22-23, 27*).

The transfer of authority triggered an outpouring of praise for the Lamb. The four Living Creatures and 24 Elders prostrated themselves in worship. The Elders had harps and bowls of incense. The "bowls full of incense" represented the prayers of God's people. Specifically, the incense represented the petitions that saints had prayed asking God to establish His righteousness. We pray this kind of prayer frequently when we say, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (*Matthew 6:10*).

There are three hymns of praise in the remaining verses of this chapter. In the Old Testament, "new songs" were sung in celebration of major accomplishments. That is the significance here. In verses 9 and 10 the Lamb is honored for four reasons. The first is His death. He had sacrificed Himself for the sake of others. The second is the purchase of a people for God. These people will come from every division of humanity. The third reason for praise is the establishment of a kingdom and priests to serve God, and the fourth reason is that God's people will be given the privilege to rule on the earth.

The opening question of this chapter was "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" The word "worthy" means "comparable to," or "equal to." In all of creation only the Lamb, Jesus, had the qualifications to "take the scroll" and to "open its seals." No other creature was "comparable to" Him. The declaration by the Elders and the Living Creatures as to the "worthiness" of Jesus was based not on His deity or His sinless human life, both of which are essential aspects of who He was, but exclusively on His sacrificial death.

Jesus, through His shed blood, "purchased" sinful humans. The word, "purchase" is often translated "redeemed." These words refer to a type of "ransom payment." It means that Jesus "bought back" individuals who were held in bondage to sin, thus offering them spiritual freedom. During His earthly ministry Jesus declared that He had come to "give His life as a ransom for many" (*Mark 10:45*). The Apostle Paul reminded his readers that they had been "bought with a price" (*I Corinthians 6:20*).

After “redeeming” people, Jesus made it possible for them to serve God. Collectively, redeemed sinners are incorporated into a spiritual kingdom. In this Church age, redeemed sinners are to be distinctive kingdom people. They are citizens of heaven with the responsibility to make known the ways of God among non-believers on earth. After His return to earth, the followers of Jesus will reign and rule with Him (*Revelation 20:4, 6; 22:5*).

Redeemed sinners also have the privilege to serve as priests of God. In the Old Testament, priests served as custodians of the sanctuary and as facilitators of public worship. It was their role to represent God before people, and on occasion, the people before God. In this present age, believers are expected to continue this service, being a witness to God and His ways in the midst of this dark evil world. Believers are already priests, but not yet identified as kings. That new identity will come when Jesus returns.

The first of the three songs involved a choir of just 28 heavenly beings — the Elders and the Living Creatures. Soon, however, John “saw and heard the voices of many many angels.” They were shouting out their praises to the Lamb who was slain. They attributed to the Lamb qualities which were descriptive, in other passages, of God the Father (*for examples, Revelation 4:11 and 7:12*). In other words, the Father and the Lamb were both being celebrated as members of the Godhead because they shared divine attributes. They were being worshipped and adored as Father and Son.

In verse 13 the choir becomes even larger. Every creature in the universe is united in praise. Notice that this third hymn of praise is for both the One “who sits on the throne and the Lamb.” In chapter 4, God the Father was praised for His works of physical creation. Here in chapter 5 God the Son, the Lamb, is praised for His work of spiritual re-creation. Thus verses 13 and 14 are a fitting conclusion to the vision of chapters 4 and 5.

Chapters 4 and 5 are a necessary foundation for all the other information in the book of Revelation. These two chapters emphasize the sovereignty of the Godhead over the universe. The Godhead controls everything that exists by rights of both creation and redemption. By His death, Jesus earned the exclusive right to execute judgment on behalf of the Father, and to complete the purposes and plans of the Father. The remaining chapters of the book of Revelation provide details about how Jesus is guiding history toward its final days.