

THE LION IS THE LAMB: Revelation chapter 5 (NIV)

*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. 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."*

*Then I saw a **Lamb**, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The **Lamb** had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. 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 God's people.*

*And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons 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." 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 were saying: "Worthy is the **Lamb**, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!"*

*Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the **Lamb** be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.*

Given that the book of Revelation is, for many readers, such a difficult poetic prophecy, with its OT symbols and different interpretations, we should start with the overall or big picture, and work toward an understanding of the intriguing details, as you might do while looking at a famous painting in an art gallery. We do not need to decode every part of John's vision. The central message of Revelation is clear: it is "*The revelation of Jesus Christ*" (1:1). Jesus is both the One revealed and the One who reveals. The Messiah-Lamb is the goal of all history: "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End*" (22:13). The place of supreme authority is God's throne (4:2). He is the Lord of history. There are three visions of the risen victorious Christ that underline his supreme authority and triumph. First, Christ is enthroned in heaven; then Christ is enthroned on earth; and finally, Christ is enthroned in the new creation. The book ends on earth, not heaven; heaven comes down to earth, rather than earth up to heaven.

The first few verses of this pastoral-prophetic letter tell us there is a blessing for those who hear its message and take it to heart. The rest of chapter one describes the glory and majesty of the risen Christ who walks among the churches. Chapters 2 and 3 contain the seven messages to the seven churches. They explain that Jesus is the sovereign Lord and what he expects from his followers in every age. The seven messages set the scene on earth and make clear the twin dangers that the Church always faces: persecution and compromise. The individual members of these seven typical churches are challenged to respond in obedient faith: "*Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*" Here is an echo of the words of Jesus: "*Whoever has ears, let them hear.*" (Matthew 13:9). We remain receptive to God's truth, and faithful, by keeping our eyes on Jesus, and on what he promises us now, and in the future.

The theme of chapters 4 and 5 is worship of the Creator and the Redeemer. These are pivotal chapters as the scene shifts to heaven, where God reigns in splendour and power from his throne. Here all heaven worships the Creator-Redeemer. Also worthy of ceaseless praise is the Lion-Lamb (Jesus), who alone is able

to open the roll or scroll, the plan of God for the future. By his sacrificial death, the Lamb has redeemed a people to serve God. The main idea of chapters 4 and 5 centres on the ascended, triumphant and exalted Jesus Christ, who alone is worthy to execute the divine judgments that follow.

Chapter five is a dramatic scene with much emotion. Heavenly worship begins near the throne and moves outward, like concentric circles, to include every being in heaven and earth. John's vision is similar to the vision of Ezekiel (2:9-10). John sees a scroll, in the right hand of God, written on both sides to show no one can add to it, and it is sealed so that no one can bring it to pass before the time. The scroll is like a Roman will, or legal document, sealed with seven seals, which now has to be read. It is in God's right hand to show that he has control over the future. God is the Lord of history. The right hand is a symbol of power and authority. Roman law required a will to be sealed by the seven seals of seven witnesses. But who has the authority to break open the seals and read it? A title deed, or will, can be opened only by the appointed heir. The seals are symbols of the hidden plan of God to be removed, in order to see God's complete plan.

When no one is found worthy, John weeps with despair, because we need God's explanation of history if its troubles are not to be meaningless. The dramatic tension of this scene is heightened by John's tears. The scroll also represents Christ's title deed to all that the Father promised him because of his sacrifice on the cross. Jesus Christ is the *"heir of all things"* (Hebrews 1:2). The mysterious scroll is the book of the future; it is the scroll of human destiny; it is the book of history. It contains God's plan of salvation and judgment, but unless it is opened, this cannot be carried out. If the scroll is unopened, then the world's evil, agony and injustice remain unchallenged.

However, John's weeping stops when one of the 24 elders points to Jesus. John's tears were unnecessary as God has his own solution. The elders have harps that were the traditional instrument used by the psalmists. Here the harp is a symbol for the music of worship, while the elders and the four living creatures represent God's people, and God's world. The Lamb stands *"in the centre before the throne"* (6). He was not among the elders, but in the middle of the circle formed by them and the living creatures. He occupied the central position before he took the scroll. The exalted Christ was among the lampstands representing churches in chapter one. He will remain centre stage throughout the drama of this book. Revelation uses "Lamb" as a title for the exalted Christ 29 times, highlighting his sacrificial role.

The emergence of the Lamb in the throne room of heaven is the supreme moment of this vision. Only one person has the necessary qualifications. He is recognized by all and given a place of pre-eminence. Symbolically, when the One on the throne hands the scroll to Christ, he authorizes the slain Messiah to execute his plan for the salvation of the world, because in and through him, God is at work in history. There is someone worthy to break the seals and bring God's purposes for the world to complete fulfilment. He alone can begin a new history for the world, end the 'might is right' attitude of the nations, and end the suffering of the poor and the oppressed. He alone can end the injustice, corruption and tragedy of our world. The world's destiny is not controlled by blind fate; we are in the hands of a loving Father and gracious Saviour.

Using the prophetic titles given in Genesis 49:9-10, and Isaiah 11:1-10, John describes Jesus as the *"Lion of the Tribe of Judah"*, and the *"Root of David"*. As predicted, the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. Isaiah 11:10 is quoted in Romans 15:12. He alone can both reveal and carry out the will of the One who sits on the throne of heaven. Yet when John looks to find this Lion, he sees only a Lamb which has been slain. The fierce Lion and the gentle Lamb are one and the same. When understood symbolically, this image conveys spiritual truth. The Lamb is God the Son, Christ Jesus! The vision of Christ brings together the twofold aspect of his first and second comings—his work as Saviour and as Sovereign. The Lamb went to the throne and took the scroll from the hand of God and prepared to open it.

Notice John links together both the redeeming and the conquering work of Christ. The cross is not only atoning and redeeming; it is conquering. Only because Jesus is the Lamb of God, faithful unto death, can he

become the King of kings. Here is the paradox that lies at the heart of the Bible: God's victory was achieved by One who was killed. He did not triumph by the world's selfish power and control. He overcame evil by dying and weakness: *"He was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him"* (2 Corinthians 13:4). Christ's "weakness" was in his becoming human, in humbling himself, and becoming obedient to death on a Roman cross. The tragedy of the cross has turned to triumph and its shame to glory.

These images of a lamb and a lion show us both the strength and the humility, the majesty and the meekness of Jesus; both his kingly power and his sacrifice. In the OT horns represent strength; the seven horns represent the fullness of power the Lamb has (6). The seven eyes portray his complete knowledge and insight; nothing escapes him. John uses these symbols to show that Christ is supremely all-powerful and all-knowing. Lambs have a special significance in the OT. The Passover lamb recalled Israel's deliverance in Egypt. As the sacrificial Lamb, Jesus has atoned for the sins of the world. John the Baptist prophesied of Jesus: *"The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29). Paul reminded the Corinthians that Christ was the perfect sacrifice for human sin: *"Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed"* (1 Corinthians 5:7; Isaiah 53:7). The Church is *"the bride of the Lamb"* (19:7; 21:9).

His triumph over death and hell gives Christ alone the authority to open the scroll: *"I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades"* (1:17-18). It is not surprising there is a great celebration in heaven! The heavenly choir now has a "new song" (9) unlike anything sung before in heaven. The new song of the living creatures and the elders celebrates the sacrificial death of Christ: *"You were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation"* (9-10). This is a missionary song. The atoning death of Jesus has secured a salvation available to all the peoples of the earth. These redeemed are the climax of the great commission. Jesus Christ has introduced a new era of the kingdom of God; it is the age of the universal Church and the indwelling Holy Spirit, one of grace and mercy in Christ. God's plan of redemption for the world will now be accomplished. The worshippers, joined by thousands of angels, extend their song giving honour to the Lamb.

Many angels *"encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders"* (12). They stand in a great outer circle and sing of the seven qualities or attributes of the risen Christ: power, riches, wisdom, strength, honour, glory, and blessing. *"Ten thousand"* (11) is a symbol for an innumerable large number. (There is no need for a calculator!) This vision is similar to Daniel's vision of the countless crowds before *"the Ancient of Days"* (Daniel 7:9-10). The whole of creation exuberantly celebrates the slain Lamb who is at the centre of it all. On earth, Jesus was born in weakness and he died in weakness. People laughed at him and mocked him. He was hungry and thirsty, reviled and humiliated, and became a curse for us on the cross. Today in heavenly glory, all of that has changed. As Prophet, Priest and King, he alone is worthy of all our praise!

The last hymn is a grand finale which involves *"every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them"* (13). The worship of God the Father and God the Son is universal and all-inclusive. The singing of birds, the sound of the waves of the sea and the wind in the trees, the shining of the sun, the moon and the stars, all are songs of praise to God. Even the dead who are in Hades add their praise! Not even the land of the dead is beyond the reign of the risen Christ. All of God's creatures, angels, and redeemed humanity, unite in praise to honour God. Is your imagination stirred by such numbers?

May we also, with every creature in heaven and earth, join in praising Him who sits on the throne and the Lamb. The key word is "worthy" (2, 9, 12). We join them in singing: *"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain"* (12). As believers we are also involved in this heavenly scene. The prayers of the saints, likened to incense, somehow influence the course of events. The twenty-four elders *"were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people"* (8). Incense symbolizes the prayers of the saints. The psalmist prayed: *"May my prayer be set before you like incense"* (141:2). John sees a picture of prayer rising to the

throne of God. In Christ, the door to God's presence is open to prayer. Prayer in this scene is not praise but petition. Why do the saints on earth petition God? Revelation emphasizes that martyrdom is the means of conquering for both Christ and his followers. In chapter 6:10 the martyrs call to God for his judgment on those who killed them: *"How long, Sovereign Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"*

In chapter 8:3-5 the prayers of the saints are immediately connected with the trumpets of God's judgment: *"Another angel...was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people... The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake".* These prayers are apparently for God's vindication of his martyred servants. *"Fire from the altar"*, from which the saints' prayers rise, will be flung to earth in judgment, indicating that the judgments to follow, answer the prayers of God's people. Like it or not, the prayers of God's people are involved with the judgments God sends. What we pray for on earth, influences the response from heaven: *"Surely there is a God who judges justly on earth"* (Ps. 58:10).

Since verse 10, *"They will reign on the earth"*, refers to the coming kingdom of God in its completion, it may be that the prayers are petitions for God to judge the world, and to extend his kingdom throughout the earth: *"And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you; he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"* (Luke 18:7-8). Jesus asks this question to encourage his disciples to constant watchfulness and prayer, prior to his return.

God's people must persist in prayer, as did the widow in Luke's parable, who persisted until she received justice. We, as the people of the Lion-Lamb that he has rescued, are intercessor-priests, and we rule or "reign" on earth by our prayers. The present tense of the verb "reign" indicates the reign of believers on earth has already begun. We have a part to play. In the strength of Christ, and through our Spirit-inspired prayers, we can and will prevail through intercession. It is often said, that the purpose of prayer is not to get human will done in heaven, but to get God's will done on earth.

Further, as believers we are *"a kingdom and priests"* (10) who serve God, by restoring his broken world by introducing people to Christ. This is a prophetic song. Ultimately, all believers shall one day *"reign on the earth"*. The earth will not always be enslaved and tormented by Satan, and destroyed by his followers. The first heaven and earth, stained by the curse through human sin, will eventually be replaced by a new and fully renewed heaven and earth (21:1) in which the followers of the Lamb will reign in righteousness.

Today all the authority and splendour of the kingdoms of the world belong to the devil (Luke 4:5-7). However, one day our godless world will no longer be the devil's playground. Eventually, *"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever"* Revelation 11:15). No matter how much unbelief and rebellion dominate the earth today, there will come a time when everything and everyone will bow before God. Ultimately heaven and earth, and all that is in them, is designed for the praise of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is our privilege to join with our voices, and our lives, to this chorus of praise.

APPLICATION TO DAILY LIFE

1. Consider the humility and glory of Jesus. No king has ever been so fit to rule as King Jesus. Yet on earth his throne was a wooden cross and his crown was made of thorns. Ask God to help you see him afresh. Trust him and follow him, whatever you face today, and every day.
2. When you feel like weeping over a lost and broken world, with feelings of hopelessness, remember that God is still on his throne, and the Lamb of God will bring justice to the earth. As believer-priests, we have a key part to play as intercessors. As a group, pray that the book of Revelation may renew your vision of the risen Jesus and refresh your faith.