

Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

Study #10: “The Scroll & The Lamb” (Revelation 5:1-14)

Did you remember to celebrate Earth Day last week? Earth Day is an interesting holiday. It first appeared in 1970 when I was a junior in high school. Not much explanation was given at that time but through the efforts of the Earth Day Network, it is now a global holiday celebrated every April 22 by 193 nations of the world. Its purpose is to promote environmental protection and respect for our planet, both worthy goals. In 1987 I myself gave the invocation and planted a tree at an Earth Day celebration sponsored by the Mayor of Tacoma. As I prayed, I made sure to give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who gave us this beautiful world and asked His help in treating it with the respect due such a priceless gift. Sad to say, I was the only one at the ceremony to mention God and His creation of the earth.

That probably doesn't surprise you because since then, the holiday has mushroomed into a worldwide movement focused on “Saving Mother Earth” and outlining steps we can take to protect her. But again, the focus is on us and what we can do to save the earth with nary a mention of her Creator. That's especially true in our public schools, where countless lessons are taught on the subject with songs and musicals available to cement the duty in the minds of our young people, often with fearful warnings that this is the only planet that can sustain life. So together teachers and students feverishly brainstorm steps we can take to save our planet.

Of course, as followers of Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created, we too believe in conservation and ought to be of all people the most conscientious caretakers of our planet. At the same time, however, we reject the religious verbiage of this movement, refusing to use phrases like “saving the planet.” For according to the Scriptures, there is only one Savior of this world—Jesus who calls us to be good stewards, but needs no saving help from us. At His return, He will not only restore this planet to its Edenic beauty, but as King of Kings and Prince of Peace, He will also establish a kingdom of peace and righteousness that will never end.

The reason He can do that is the focus of this study. Continuing with the Apostle John on his journey into Tomorrowland, we see what's next in God's agenda for our world. It is found in Revelation 5 where a problem is suddenly introduced in heaven. A scroll is revealed in the hand of Him who sits on the throne. But tears are shed because no one is found worthy to open it! Let's discover, first of all then, what is so significant about the scroll, why someone must be found to open it, and what the opening of its seals means for the future of the earth.

1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SCROLL

John writes in verse 1, “And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?’ And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it. So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it.”

First, let's ask the question—

A. What does the Scroll symbolize?

In ancient times, this was the legal method of securing an inheritance. For example, when the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus died, that was how his will was prepared. It was written on a scroll and secured with seven royal seals. Hal Lindsey describes the process in his book, There's a New World Coming. He says:

“For such a document, a scribe would procure a long roll of parchment and begin writing. After a period of writing, he would stop, roll the parchment enough to cover his words, and seal the scroll at that point with wax. Then he would resume writing, stop again, roll the scroll, and add another seal. By the time it was finished, he would have sealed the scroll seven times. The scroll would then be read a section at a time, after each seal was opened. Why was this process used? It was to prevent unauthorized persons from tampering with the scroll or reading and revealing its contents. Only a ‘worthy’ person—that is, someone with proper authority—could have legal access to the scroll’s message.”

But that raises a second question—

B. What was to be inherited?

The answer is property. According to Jewish law, when a family had to sell its land due to poverty, that property could not be taken away from them permanently. Instead, their losses were written in a scroll and sealed seven times with the conditions included for buying it back written on the outside. Then, when a qualified “redeemer” came forward who could meet the conditions, the one who purchased the property was forced to sell it back to the original family.

An example is found in Jeremiah 32, where the prophet buys a piece of property just before Jerusalem is captured. So he records the purchase in a scroll. Why? As a testimony that one day he and God’s people would return to the city and reclaim their family’s possessions.

How does that help us understand the scroll in Revelation 5? What property is in view here? The most important property of all—the ownership of the earth. When God placed our first parents in the Garden, He gave them dominion over the entire earth. Genesis 1:28 says, “Then God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” But then Adam and Eve rebelled against the Lord’s commandment, and what happened? The earth was cursed and Satan seized control of the planet, so that 1 John 5:19 says, “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one.” But he has no legal claim to this planet. He’s like the White Witch in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, who made it always winter but never Christmas. He is not the legitimate ruler. How do we know? Because of where the scroll is. It’s in the hand of God, waiting for a redeemer to open it and reclaim the world for man. That is why John is weeping. No one qualified has been found to open it.

W. A. Criswell, the great preacher, explained: “John’s tears represent the tears of all God’s people through the centuries. They’re the tears of Adam and Eve as they view the still form of their dead son, Abel, and sense the awful consequence of their disobedience. They are the tears of the children of Israel in bondage as they cried to God for deliverance from their affliction and slavery. They’re the sobs and tears wrung from the heart and soul of God’s

people as they have stood beside the graves of loved ones and experience the indescribable heartaches and disappointments of life. Such is the curse that sin has laid upon God's beautiful creation. No wonder John wept so fervently. If no redeemer could be found to remove the curse, it meant that God's creation was forever consigned to remain in the hands of Satan.

Have you ever lost a piece of family property? In the early 1920's, my great grandfather built a home in the north end of Tacoma that he gave to my grandmother as a wedding gift. But when my grandmother died, seventy years later, no one in the family had the money to buy it or the time to fix it up and rent it. So, after being in the family for three-quarters of a century, we were forced to sell it to strangers. That was hard! Every time I drive by it, it doesn't seem right that someone else should be living in it. The only thing more difficult was watching the same thing happen to my parents' home where I grew up and in which they lived for over fifty years!

In a sense, that is what happened to this planet, and why modern man is so confused and disillusioned. God created this world for His children. But as a result of our sin and neglect, an evil and powerful stranger slipped in and stole it from us. Like John, it makes me want to cry. But the good news is that God has a solution to this great tragedy! That's the second truth we need to understand. We've seen the significance of the seal. Now let's look at—

2. THE WORTHINESS OF THE LAMB

Just as John is about to lose all hope, a “worthy” Redeemer steps forward to open the scroll. Who is it? The Lord Jesus Christ! Why is He qualified to open it? John gives two reasons.

A. Why He is worthy to open the scroll

First, He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. 155 times in the Old Testament and 9 times in the New Testament Jesus is called a lion, picturing His power to judge. That makes sense in this context because once the seals are broken in chapter 6, what follows? God's wrath is poured out on the earth, more and more as each seal is broken. So it's vital to establish from the outset that Jesus has the power and authority to do so. Who gave Him this power? God the Father. As Jesus said in Matthew 28:18, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and one earth.” He added in John 5:22, “For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father.” Nor is He merely a lion; He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. Verse 5 continues, “But one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and loose its seals.’” John is emphasizing Jesus' Old Testament credentials as Messiah, that He came as prophesied. Genesis 49:10 says, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes.” That is to say, the Christ would come from the tribe of Judah. And Jesus did, giving Him both the power and authority as Judge of all the earth.

Second, He is the Lamb that was slain. Verse 6 adds, “And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.” “And,” drop down to verse 9, those around the throne “sang a new song, saying, ‘You are worthy to take the scroll, and open its seals; for You were slain.’”

Two key facts to notice here. First, the price of redemption. You can see this in the word for “lamb.” The Greek word is *arnios*, which means a precious little pet lamb carefully chosen from the flock for its beauty and perfection. Then, five days before the Passover, it was brought into the home and treated like a member of the family—just long enough for both children and adults to grow to love it. It was loved, petted, cuddled, and only then was it offered as a sacrifice.

A bunny is not a lamb, but I witnessed something like that when our girls’ bunny got out of its cage. We had him for five years, and the girls didn’t seem to pay much attention to it. So I didn’t realize how much they loved him. They searched all day and couldn’t find it. When I got home from work, I mentioned that sometimes when an animal gets old and is about to die, it crawls off by itself and is never seen again. My words weren’t of much help, because that’s when the tears began to flow. “We don’t want Thumper to die!” So I quickly joined the hunt, and as it turned out, he didn’t die. Somehow he’d managed to get down into the crawl space under the house and was having the time of his life running from one end to the other. In fact, he was having such a good time that it took us another half day and a bag of carrots before we could coax him out. But we kept at it until we did because he was precious to our family.

Jesus was God’s precious Lamb. John the Baptist said of Him, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” He was God’s most precious possession, the joy of His heart. And yet, He was willing to slaughter Him for our salvation. That is something He never wants us to forget, that He loves us so much that He sacrificed His only begotten Son. How do we know He wants us to remember that? Because of how He is described. John says He still looks like a Lamb that was slain. You see, God could have removed the nail prints from His hands and the spear wound from His side when He resurrected Him. But He didn’t. Why not? Because He never wants us to forget the price of our redemption. That’s why He’s also told us as often as we eat the bread and drink from the cup, we’re to do so in remembrance of Him.

Notice also the power of His redemption. The phrase, “as though it had been slain,” is in the present tense in the Greek, meaning that even though it happened long ago in the past, its results continue into the future. That is to say, “the blood will never lose its power.” Hebrews 7:25 promises, “Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, He does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for His own sins, then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when He offered Himself.”

This, then, is why He is worthy to open the scroll, reclaim the earth for man, and rule as our King—because He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah and the Lamb that was slain. How should we act toward Him as a result? As we read the rest of the chapter, it becomes clear. Some of you may be aware of this, that there is a direct connection between the words “worship” and “worthy.” Our word “worship” comes from the Anglo-Saxon term “worthship,” which means to recognize the value of something. And that’s what we find here. All of heaven now bows in worship singing a new song of praise to the glory of the Lamb.

B. How He will be worshiped

There are four facts we should heed about this new song of praise. First, it is a song

which belongs to the church. Verse 8 says, “Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, ‘You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain.’” While the four living creatures join us in worship, this new song is one which belongs exclusively to the church. The grammar in verse 8 makes it clear. Only the twenty-four elders will play the harps, offer up golden bowls of incense, and sing the new song of praise. Why? Because only we can understand the story of God’s grace. 1 Peter 1:12 says that “angels desire to look into” the things concerning our salvation. But only we who have experience the wonder of having sinned and been forgiven, can rightly sing this song. The songwriter, Johnson Oatman, wrote:

*Holy, holy is what the angels sing,
And I expect to help them make the courts of heaven right.
But when I sing redemption’s story, they will fold their wings;
For angels never felt the joy that our salvation brings.*

Can you rightly sing this song? Do you have a faith story to share with others? Maybe you come from a profligate background. Or maybe you were caught in the trap of false religion. The lyrics vary at points. But if Jesus Christ has saved you from your sin, the song is yours to sing. It’s the song of God’s love and forgiveness. So don’t be afraid to sing it! Because that is what people need to hear. The story of God’s amazing grace and forgiveness.

Second, it is a song that unites all believers. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury once wrote: “This world can be saved from political chaos and collapse by one thing only, and that is worship.” I read that and wondered, “How can that be true? Worship is important, but how can it be the solution to all the problems of the world—ISIS steamrolling the countries in the Middle East, starvation and disease in Africa, political division, and the disintegration of the family here at home? How can worship solve these things? Then I realized it’s because worship has the power to knit our hearts together. In heaven there will be no division. John says in verse 9, “And they sang a new song, saying: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God.’”

Ever since Cain killed Abel, humankind has fought a losing battle against hatred. No matter how hard we try, lasting peace eludes us because the problem originates in our hearts. But one day soon peace will replace animosity. Believers from every tribe, tongue, and nation will worship at the throne of God in perfect unity. What will make the difference? Our mutual love for Jesus Christ! Ephesians 2:14 explains, “For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed...the dividing wall of hostility...for through Him we both have access to the Father by One Spirit. We will be filled with One Spirit, knitting our hearts together in such a deep love for Christ and one another that all bitterness and hostility will be impossible.

Finally, it is a song that inspires others to worship. How many? An innumerable multitude! The highest number in Greek was a myriad or ten thousand. Here John begins by saying, “ten thousand times ten thousand.” That’s 100 million! Then he adds, “and thousands of thousands,” making the number so large that only the Creator Himself can count them all. And what will we all be doing? Worshipping the Lamb. For even though this song belongs to the

church, nothing can keep all of creation joining in the chorus: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” But it doesn’t end there. Verse 13 adds, “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, 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, forever and ever!’”

So, if there is someone you want to influence for Christ, start with worship. Worship is the most powerful force on earth for softening the hearts of the unredeemed. Argument and anger never bring anyone into the kingdom. Nor do guilt and manipulation. The one thing that touches the hearts of unbelievers when we talk to them about Jesus is the fact that we’ve been with Him. So spend time in His presence. Say “No” to the myriad of good things that are vying for your attention. And begin to spend time every day worshiping at the feet of Jesus. Not only will it change your attitude and perspective toward life, it will also make an impact on others who realize, like the apostles of old, that you have “been with Jesus.”

The story is told of a father whose wife died, leaving him with a single daughter. The father worked long hours to support them and found his single joy to be the time they spent together in the evenings—playing games, reading, talking. Then, as fall turned to winter, the girl began to excuse herself in the evenings, saying there was something she had to do in her room. Disappointed, but not wanting to be demanding, the father let her go. Each evening it was the same until finally, on Christmas Day, she burst into his room saying, “Merry Christmas,” holding up a pair of crocheted slippers she’d made for him. Of course, he thanked her, but later, when the time was right, he admitted to her, “The slippers you made me are beautiful, but I would have much rather had you with me all those lonely evenings when you left me by myself.”

The same is true of our Heavenly Father. He isn’t sad or lonely, but He does want us to know that even more precious than what we do for Him is the time we spend worshiping Him.

Will you do that? Will you give the Lord Jesus the worship He deserves? He is “worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,” because He was slain and has “redeemed us to God by His blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” So let’s take time to give Him the worship which He alone deserves.