

Worthy Is the Lamb

By Brad Allison on 7/4/2004

Scripture Reference *Revelation 4-5*

The common outline of the book of Revelation comes from a verse in chapter one. "Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this" (v. 19). That verse suggests a division consisting of two sections, one that describes the things that are, and the second describing the things that are to take place after this. Chapters 2-3 comprise that first section, as they describe the present situation in the seven churches. Beginning in chapter four and continuing through the remainder of the book, the things of the future are described. This is where things can get a little confusing in the study of this book. How ought we to understand this description of the future? Some would say that we can learn some very specific details about particular periods of time. For example, right after Wendy and I were married in December of 1980, we went to a church and read the following sermon title: "What The Bible Says Will Happen to Russia in the 1980's." The preacher claimed that the Bible spoke with clarity about such specific topics. As I recall, he was sure that Russia would grow in power throughout that decade and become a threat to Israel, leading to the Second Coming of Christ. As we all know, the exact opposite occurred.

If we can't expect this to read like history written beforehand, how should we read it? Herman Hoeksema, who's written a very good exposition of this book, says it like this.

We must remember that what is pictured in this part is both contemporaneous and consecutive. History repeats itself. And in that ever-repeating history you will see the recurrence of the scenes pictured on this screen. Only you must remember this, that they develop and repeat themselves with ever increasing force and vehemence, till finally Christ shall come to establish His own kingdom forever and in perfect righteousness. (*Behold He Cometh*, p. 153)

In other words, we can expect this book to describe broad themes that are characteristic of this entire age between Jesus' first and second coming. It will be a time where both the evil kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God both grow in power and influence. There will be an ongoing struggle between the two, until Jesus brings about an ultimate victory for all time.

Our passage this morning is the first part of this section about the future, and it begins with the end. Books on management tell you to begin with the end in view, but that principle has been around much longer than our management books. Right at the outset of this book, we are shown a scene in heaven that describes how all will be concluded. It will be concluded with Jesus reigning in heaven. Just as in management, if we fail to begin with the end in view, the result is an aimless wandering. We will quickly get off track by any number of distractions and pressures. Remember that this book was written to suffering people, to whom it seemed that the evil kingdom of this world was all powerful. But they are shown in this book how things will play out in the future. The kingdom of God, that seemed so powerless to them, will grow and prosper by the hand of Jesus until all things will be directly ruled by him. Jesus will sit on his throne, and all will be concluded exactly as he wills. The kingdom of God will come. We who live in a fallen world need this constant reminder of how it will all end. We live in an ocean of suffering and trials, and unless we keep clearly in view our destination, we will wander around aimlessly. John has been taken up to heaven by means of a visionary experience, and we read in these chapters what he sees there. In a word, what he sees is the worship of God. How will it all end? It will end in the worship of God. I want us to consider two points about that worship this morning. Chapter 4 portrays the centrality of worship, and chapter 5 the drama of worship.

I. The Centrality of Worship

John reports three things he sees in his vision of heaven. He sees a throne in the middle, upon which God himself sits; he sees a ring of 24 thrones around that, upon which the 24 elders sit; and he sees these four creatures who are also around the throne. Let's begin with the throne in the middle, upon which God is seated. This symbol of the throne occurs more than 40 times in the book of Revelation, teaching us of God's sovereign control over this world. Despite the seeming weakness of God's church on the earth, especially in comparison to the power of the kingdom of this world, God is in control. The late Leslie Newbigin was once asked whether he was optimistic or pessimistic about some issue. He replied, "I'm neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead." We don't know whether good things or bad will happen, but we do know that a good God is on the throne, ruling all things for his glory and the good of his people.

Next, John sees the 24 elders seated on thrones around the central throne. There is much discussion about the identity of these 24 elders. I understand them to be representative of the church throughout the history of the world. They are called elders, which tells me that they are humans, not some angelic order. And their number is significant, as are all numbers in this book. 24 is two groups of 12, indicating the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of the New Testament. So these 24 elders are, as I said, representative of the church of God in both the Old and New Testaments. Hold that thought while we look at the third thing John sees.

John also sees these four creatures. They are similar in that they are covered with eyes and have six wings each. But their overall appearance differs, in that the first has the appearance of a lion, the second of an ox, the third of a man and the last one of an eagle. The explanation of those differences lies in seeing what they are doing. "Day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'" They worship 24-7. They are worshipping creatures, and they have a leadership role, as we read that their worship of God leads the 24 elders to "fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever."

What is indicated by these four different appearances of the worshipping creatures? It teaches us the four necessary qualities for worship. The lion is known for his courage, and if we are to worship God we need to have the courage to bring our true selves to him. Where there is a cowardly covering up of our sin, there is no true worship. The ox is known for the strength of his service. A second element that must be present in the true worship of God is a certain strength, seen especially in some of the mundane aspects of worship. There is a need in worship to plow new ground, learn new songs, diligently prepare for worship. In short, one aspect of worship feels something like the ox going up and down the rows of the field pulling the plow. It may not be glamorous, but it is necessary. The third creature has the appearance of a man, who is the most intelligent of all God's creatures. True worship must have an intellectual component. The mind must be engaged to understand what God has said to us. Finally, the last creature has the appearance of an eagle, the swiftest of God's creatures. I think that speaks to us of the necessity of being quick to apply what God tells us in his word. So if we are to worship God, we must have courage to be honest, strength to be faithful in the mundane parts of worship, a willingness to engage our intellect, and a readiness to apply what God says to us.

Let me make two applications before moving to the next chapter. The first application comes from seeing the fact that worship is the central activity of heaven. In this chapter, there is nothing going on except worship. The throne is in the middle of heaven and worship is the

main activity of heaven. Now here's the application question: does that fact make heaven less desirable for you? Were you hoping for a golf course or an island paradise full of sun and leisure? If so, then you need to ask yourself whether or not you know the Jesus who is at the center of heaven. Remember that these worshipping creatures have eyes everywhere on their bodies. They see things as they truly are, and the response of such a view is to worship. If worship seems to you like flossing your teeth—an unwanted task you do simply because you believe it's the right thing to do—but nothing more, then you aren't seeing Jesus as he really is. Ask God to open your eyes to see Jesus.

The second application stems from this act of the 24 elders to cast their crowns before the throne of God and worship him. What does that mean? A crown is a symbol of ruling. In Bible days, kings wore crowns as symbols of their authority. As followers of Jesus, we are given authority to rule this earth as God's representatives. Paul says that the saints will be the ones to judge the world (1 Cor. 6:2). So our passage portrays Jesus' people doing two things: ruling and worshipping. But notice which one is more central. They give up their ruling in order to worship. Or to say it differently, worship is more central to who we are than is work. Your highest use is not work but worship. Someone has said, "Most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, to work at their play and to play at their worship. As a result, their meanings and values are distorted. Their relationships disintegrate faster than they can keep them in repair, and their lifestyles resemble a cast of characters in search of a plot."

Illustration: Though I was unable to confirm this report, I read of an account of a new Navy jet fighter that shot itself down. Flying at supersonic speed, it ran into cannon shells it had fired only a few seconds before. The jet was traveling too fast. We often start traveling too fast and end up shooting ourselves down. Our need is to slow down and re-center our lives on the worship of Jesus.

Illustration #2: I was speaking with someone this week who told me that he sat down to pay his bills, and after paying them all he had \$10 left in his checking account. He told me that his heart was filled with joy that God had provided enough to pay all his bills. He added that he could have had \$10 million left in his account and he would not have had more joy. He went on to say that this attitude of joy was quite a change from his previous attitude of being filled with anxiety about everything going on in his life. The difference was that he had been convicted about his need to re-center his life on Jesus and his promises. God calls us to do that. I believe that looking at our next point will help us to do so.

II. The Drama of Worship

Chapter 5 is one of the more dramatic chapters of the book, centering on this scroll that has been sealed with seven seals. I interpret this scroll to refer to the plan of God for bringing forth his kingdom, a kingdom of peace and joy for its subjects. Both sides of the scroll have been used for writing, indicating that God's plan cannot be added to or taken away from. But there's a problem. No one is found who can open the scroll. In the Biblical view of things, to open the scroll is to execute what is written there. Words are not just symbolic marks on a page, but have with them the power to make so the things that are written. So when we read that no one is able to open the scroll, it means that no one is able to bring about the plan of God for the bringing in of his kingdom. All seems hopeless, and John weeps tears of despair. But just when things seem to be at their worst, a light dawns. One of the elders tells him that the time for weeping is past, because there is a hero on the horizon. It is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David. He is able to bring about God's kingdom, and he does so as "a Lamb standing as though it had been slain." This Lamb has seven horns, indicating perfect

power, and seven eyes, indicating perfect wisdom.

This is the basic narrative of all time. Even today, a good story is marked by these same elements. There is a noble task to be undertaken, one that will bring great benefit to many. But then obstacles appear, and the great undertaking seems doomed to failure. And then at just the last moment, when things seem about as dark as they can be, a hero emerges who saves the day. That's the drama that is repeated in each of our lives, and lies at the center of our worship. Point 1 – everyone longs for a kingdom of peace and joy to be personally experienced. Deep within is a sense that we were created for something bigger than ourselves, something glorious and deeply satisfying. Point 2 – after attempting to bring in this kingdom through a variety of means (money, work, appearance, children), there is nothing but failure. “No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth” is able to do it. Despair sets in, until we see the Lion who is lamb-like. Point 3 – Jesus is the Lamb, and he brings the kingdom through his sacrifice as the Lamb of God. Only one who is both all powerful as the Lion, and also the one who dies for sin as the Lamb can bring in the kingdom. It is essential that we locate ourselves in this story. All of us are somewhere in this drama. Perhaps we are at the place of trying to bring in the peace and joy of the kingdom through some means like money or good looks. Or maybe we are weeping in despair because it's not working. Where we need to be is seeing the Lamb as the only one who can open the scroll and bring in the kingdom.

CONCLUSION:

We can't worship until we know this story, and we must rehearse it every day. Dr. Alexander Whyte was a 19th century Scottish preacher, who tells of another preacher who came to a fresh understanding of the Lamb of God who was slain in order to ransom a people of God. The two had been in a lengthy church meeting all day, and when it finally ended all the participants left except for one, an older minister who seemed to want to talk to Dr. Whyte. The man just seemed to engage in small talk, and Whyte couldn't figure out why he didn't leave like the others. Finally he said, seemingly in jest, “Now Dr. Whyte, what word of comfort do you have for an old sinner like me?” It was said as a joke, but Alexander Whyte said that beneath the smile, he saw great pain. It took his breath away. Here was an old man in the faith, and somehow he was unable to lay claim to the goodness and mercy of Christ. Dr. Whyte wasn't sure what to do. He got up from his chair and walked to the man and said simply, “My God delights in showing mercy.” Not much more was said that evening and the older man left. But the next day, a note came from him saying, “Dr. Whyte, that word you gave me last night brought great hope to my soul. I was near the gates of hell, but those words brought me back to grace and mercy.”

Will you hear the word of Jesus to you today? Perhaps you are in some state of despair. Maybe there is sin that is bringing great condemnation to you. Jesus says to you, “Weep no more.” The Lamb of God has been slain. Without him there will be only weeping. There is hero who alone saves the day, and his name is Jesus Christ. We are here to worship him today, and we will be doing that for eternity. He is worthy. May he open the eyes of all of us that we might see his worthiness and fall down and worship him!