

## **“Worthy Is the Lamb” (Revelation 5)**

**April 11, 2021**

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Where is history going? Is that something that you ever think about? If you're like me, you think about your own life, your own history. You think about what's in your past, and you also look forward to what will happen in your future. Or perhaps you don't look forward to the future, but dread it. Whatever you think about the past, present, and future, I think it's natural to think about the shape of our own lives. But what about the shape of all of reality? Where is everything going?

There have always been people who think about such things. Some people think things are always getting better. In their view, the key to unlocking a better future is technology. If we just have the right scientific formulas and the right algorithms, we can live longer and better lives. On such a view, those who hold the key to history are the chemists, the computer scientists, and engineers.

There are other people who assume that things are always getting worse. The pessimists say that we're regressing from some golden age into a dark future. And even if things get better or worse for a while, it all ends in death. Our solar system will die out with the sun someday, and that will be that.

There have been others, like the ancient Stoics of Greece, who thought that history moves in cycles. Each cycle begins and ends with a cosmic conflagration: everything burns and begins again. History doesn't really go anywhere, and everything that happens will happen again.

Others think there is no rhyme or reason to human history. It's all just a series of accidents without any deeper meaning. There's no overarching plan, no purpose, no goal.

The way that we look at the shape of reality may seem like a very abstract sort of thing, but it matters for our lives. If we really thought that there is no point to existence, that everything will be swallowed up in death, that eventually we and everything and everyone we've ever known will be forgotten, it's hard to see how our lives could matter. If everything just ceases to exist someday and everything will be forgotten, then the same end comes for those who lived good lives and those who have lived bad lives. What's the point?

On the other hand, if you think reality is going somewhere, then depending on your view of reality, your life will change. If you think we can be the masters of our fate, that we can find a

way to beat all diseases and live forever, then you would desperately try to create a utopia. You would stop at nothing to make the world a better place. You wouldn't rest until you knew all would be well.

Christianity teaches that reality does have a definite shape. It has a beginning and an end, a goal. It has purpose and meaning. How we live matters. But unlike the secular story of inexorable and inevitable progress, in which science cures all ills, Christianity teaches that we are not the masters of our fates. We do not have the power to root out all evil. We do not hold the keys of history. But there is someone who does hold those keys, and that someone has conquered evil, and that person is worthy of our worship.

We'll see all of this in Revelation 5, the passage that we'll look at today. Before we start reading, here's a brief reminder of what we've seen so far in this final and fascinating book of the Bible. A man named John, likely the apostle John, was on the island of Patmos, off the western coast of what was then known as Asia Minor. This is at the end of the first century AD, about six decades after Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave. John was probably exiled there for preaching the gospel. The whole area around the Mediterranean belonged to the Roman Empire, which did not accept Christianity as a legal religion. On the Lord's Day, a Sunday, Jesus appeared spoke to him, telling him to write what he sees to seven churches within that province of Asia Minor. Jesus tells John to write what he sees because most of Revelation is a series of images, ones that are strange to our modern sensibilities. But these images are very symbolic and meaningful.

In chapters 2 and 3, Jesus addresses these seven churches, commending them for what they have done well and calling them to repent of apathy, lack of love, and false doctrine. He promises that those who repent and continue to follow him will conquer and will receive rewards.

In chapter 4, which we looked at two weeks ago, John is given a view of God in heaven. More specifically, we might say he is given a view of God's throne room, where God is worshiped by twenty-four elders, probably representing all of God's people, and four strange, otherworldly creatures.

Today, that vision of God's throne room continues. Let's begin by reading verses 1–5:

<sup>1</sup> Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. <sup>2</sup> And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break

its seals?”<sup>3</sup> And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it,<sup>4</sup> and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.<sup>5</sup> And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”<sup>1</sup>

Let’s try to make sense of what is happening here. The one seated on the throne is God. More specifically, he is God the Father. And he’s holding in his right hand a scroll. The scroll has writing on the inside on and on the back, and it is sealed with seven seals. Apparently, this is an important scroll, because an angel asks who is worthy to open it, implying that not just anyone can open it. Then we’re told that “no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth” can open it. That seems to suggest that no creature could open it. Then John weeps loudly because no one can open it. Whatever this scroll is, it must be extremely important, and John despairs that no one will be able to unlock it and read its contents.

So, what is this scroll? As is often the case, there are some Old Testament passages that provide important background information. In the book of Ezekiel, God gives the prophet Ezekiel a scroll (Ezek. 2:8–10). We’re told that “it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe” (Ezek. 2:10). There, the scroll seems to contain words of judgment.

The fact that it is sealed and can’t be read by just anyone alludes to a statement in Isaiah 29:11, which, like the scroll in Ezekiel, is also made in the context of coming judgment. In Daniel 12, we’re told of a book that is sealed, and this book contains things that will occur in the future, at what we would call “the end times.” So, the scroll likely contains something to do with end time judgment. Greg Beale, who has written a massive commentary on Revelation, says, “The ‘book’ is best understood as containing God’s plan of judgment and redemption, which has been set in motion by Christ’s death and resurrection but has yet to be completed.”<sup>2</sup>

But perhaps there is more to the scroll than just that. In the book of Exodus, we’re told that the Ten Commandments were written on the front and back of stone tablets (Exod. 32:15). The Ten Commandments were the key part of the “old covenant” that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. If Israel were to be God’s people, they needed to obey God’s word. A covenant is a bit like a legal relationship, a binding agreement between two parties. According to Greg Beale,

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 340.

the details about this scroll are similar to a specific legal document in the Roman world. He says that Roman wills were similar in certain ways: “(1) the contents of such a will was sometimes summarized on the back; (2) a will had to be witnessed and sealed by seven witnesses; (3) only on the death of the testator could a will be unsealed and the legal promise of the inheritance be executed; (4) a trustworthy executor would then put the will into legal effect.”<sup>3</sup>

What does this mean? Well, imagine a strange scenario. Imagine that there is a fantastically wealthy man, a trillionaire, who has a will written, a will that can only be executed, of course, once that man dies. He has given a vague summary of the will in advance: He says that when he dies, he has instructions that will set a plan in motion that will change the world. Let’s say that this trillionaire claims that he has a plan to create a business that will solve the problem of poverty, and that he is leaving it to his heirs to put the plan into practice. But only a worthy person can execute this will once the man dies; it can’t be put into practice by just anyone.

That is kind of like what is happening here. It seems that the scroll contains God’s plan for the world. We can see the part written on the outside of the scroll, a general summary of what the plan is about. We have a vague notion of what is going to happen because God has promised that certain things will occur. He has promised that he will bless the world (Ge. 12:1–3). He has promised that he will make a new creation (Isa. 65:17). He has promised that death will be swallowed up forever (Isa. 25:8). Those are promises that God made in the Old Testament. But who will put this plan into practice? Who is worthy to execute God’s plans?

According to Beale, this scroll may have something to do with God’s kingdom. God had initially given humans the role of holding dominion over the earth. God’s plan was to have human beings rule the earth (Gen. 1:26–28). And in Revelation 5, we are told about a king who reigns and who makes his people reign on earth, so it makes sense that the scroll has something to do with God’s plans for his kingdom. Beale says, “God promised to Adam that he would reign over the earth. . . . A human person had to open the book because the promise was made to humanity. But no person was found worthy to open it because all are sinners and stand under the judgment contained in the book.”<sup>4</sup> God made us to reign over the world by first coming under his reign. He made us to know him, love him, and obey him. But the first human beings rebelled

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 341.

against God. They didn't trust that God's plans are right. They didn't trust that God is good. And we are the same. We are not worthy to execute God's plans because we are rebels against God. In fact, because we are rebels, whatever judgments written in the scroll should apply to us.

So, here is the point: The scroll seems to contain God's plan for his creation, a plan that includes both judgment against evil and evil people and salvation for God's people. But no one seems worthy to execute this plan. And that's why John is weeping. He desperately wants to see God's promises come true. And for a moment, it seems like no one is worthy to set God's plan in motion. The fact that there are seven seals on this scroll means that it is thoroughly sealed. Seven is a number of completion or perfection. For us to understand the importance of this, imagine that a formula to cure cancer is written on the inside of the scroll, and that only a worthy scientist can open it. We desperately want there to be a cure for cancer. We would weep if there were a cure, but no one was worthy to manufacture and distribute the cure. But the scroll doesn't contain just a cure for one disease. It has the cure for all our ills. It has a cure for evil and death.

But there is hope. In verse 5, John is told, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." The Lion of the tribe of Judah refers to a prophecy in Genesis 49, that someone from the tribe of Judah, one of the twelve tribes of Israel, would be a ruler who would command "the obedience of the peoples," or nations (Gen. 49:10). The "Root of David" refers to a king, not only someone from Judah, but a descendant of King David, who would be a perfect King, and who would bring about justice, peace, and righteousness (Isa. 11:1–10; see also Jer. 23:5). If we were to take time to look at those passages in the Old Testament that speak of a promised King of Israel who would reign forever and bring about a perfect age of justice and peace, we would imagine someone of great strength, someone who conquers by crushing his enemies. And we are told in verse 5 that this King has conquered, and he is able to open the scroll.

Who is this King? Let's read verses 6–10:

<sup>6</sup> And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup> And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. <sup>8</sup> And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. <sup>9</sup> And they sang a new song, saying,

"Worthy are you to take the scroll

and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation,  
<sup>10</sup> and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth.”

In verse 5, John *heard* something about the one who was worthy to open the scrolls. Now, he *sees* the one who is worthy. I imagine that when heard about a conquering King, he had something in mind, perhaps a warrior with a sword and an army. But when he looks, he sees a Lamb. Lambs were animals that were sacrificed, beginning with the lambs that were sacrificed at Passover. The idea is that Israel was sinful: like Adam and Eve, they rebelled against God and they deserved to be judged, and the penalty for sin is death. But God allowed them to symbolically transfer their sin to animals such as lambs, who were sacrificed in their place. When John looks, he sees a “Lamb, as though it had been slain.” This Lamb “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” This Lamb is none other than Jesus, the Son of God, who died on the cross to bear the sins of everyone who trusts in him. Jesus was proclaimed to be “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29; see also Isa. 53:7; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:19). We’re told that people from all different people groups, people from all parts of the world, will be part of his kingdom.

It is strange to think that Jesus could be both a Lion and a Lamb. How can a conquering King also be sacrificed? Jesus is both because when he first came to earth, he came to die as the sin-bearer, the one who takes away judgment from sinners. He came as the Lamb, not the Lion. Jesus didn’t come with an army to crush the Roman Empire and anyone else who might be against Israel. He came to remove our real enemy, which is sin. Jesus’ death, as well as his resurrection, is the key part of God’s plan to bless the world, to remove all evil, to remove death itself. Jesus’ death sets the plan of the will in motion, and yet Jesus is also the executor of the will. He alone is worthy.

There are many details here, and it can be overwhelming to try to take them all in. But just focus on this: Jesus is the key to God’s plans for his creation. Jesus is the key figure in the history of the universe. And Jesus’ death was no accident; it was the key part of God’s plan to ransom a people for himself, to buy them from a state of condemnation and bring them into his kingdom to reign forever.

Though Jesus is a Lamb who was slain, he's not just a mere human being. He has seven horns. Horns are symbols of strength, and seven is that number of completion and perfection. Jesus is perfectly and thoroughly strong. The Lamb also has seven eyes. He can see everything. He's omniscient. And he has the authority to go right up to God on the throne and take that scroll from him. That is a bold move. If we truly understood how great, how majestic, God is, we would understand what is happening here. We couldn't just walk into the White House and grab a confidential document out of the President's hand. But Jesus has the authority to do that.

So, not only is Jesus a Lamb who was slain, but he's also the true King, the one who is worthy to reign in God's Kingdom. And since we were told that no creature "in heaven and on earth and under the earth" could open the scroll, Jesus is no mere creature. He is God.

I'll explain some more details of what we've read, but before I do that, let's read the rest of this chapter. Here are verses 11–14:

<sup>11</sup> Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, <sup>12</sup> saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
and honor and glory and blessing!”

<sup>13</sup> And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

<sup>14</sup> And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Before we read these words, I said that Jesus is God. There are several indications of this in this passage. One is the fact that Jesus has the authority to go right up to God the Father on the throne and take the scroll from him, the scroll that no mere creature could open. We also see in this passage that these elders, probably angels who represent all of God's people, worship Jesus. In chapter 4, they were worshiping God (Rev. 4:10–11). Here they are, among thousands of angels, worshiping Jesus, and God does not correct them.

These angels praise Jesus. He is worthy, apparently because he died, to receive power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing. These are things ascribed to God in the Old

Testament. In 1 Chronicles 29:11–12, we’re told that God should receive power, glory, riches, and honor. In Daniel 2:20, we’re told that God is worthy of blessing, wisdom, and might. If Jesus were not God, it would be idolatrous of all these angels to worship Jesus and to ascribe to him these things. Jesus is worthy of our worship because Jesus died to redeem us from sin and because Jesus is God.

In this passage, we’re also told that “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” worship the Father and the Son. Now, we don’t see every creature that exists worshiping God, but that is what should happen. Everything was made to glorify God, to praise him. That is why we exist. That means our lives have purpose and meaning. We’re not here by accident. We were made for God. We should be praising God in this way. But we don’t, which is evidence of our sin. If we understood who God really is, if we saw something of his majesty, his wisdom, his might, his glory, we would fall down before him and praise him as we should.

The Bible clearly says that Jesus is the central figure of history. His death and resurrection are not just nice little religious symbols. They’re not just real events that happened and are significant. They are *the* significant acts in history. The Son of God’s becoming a human being, living the perfect life that we should live, dying to bear the penalty of our sin, and rising from the grave are the most important events of history. Christianity is not some nice little add-on to your life. You don’t sprinkle a little Jesus on your Sunday mornings. Jesus holds the keys of history in his hands. And all history is headed towards him. He is God, the Creator, the Sustainer, the Redeemer, and the King. And he is worthy of our worship.

We shouldn’t just notice that Jesus is the one in control of history and that he is God, though both of those points are extremely important. We should also know that Jesus conquered not through sheer power, by crushing his enemies, but by laying down his life. Now, when Jesus comes to earth again, he will crush his enemies. He will destroy death. But he didn’t come to do those things the first time. And we conquer not through raw power, through dominating our enemies, through exerting our will over everyone else. We conquer by clinging to Jesus, by trusting that he is who the Bible says he is and that he has done what the Bible says he does. We conquer by even being willing to die for Jesus. We don’t conquer through political power or economic might. We don’t conquer through technology, though technology is a great gift. Our problem is that we idolize power and we want to be lions instead of being lambs. But following



Jesus means that we are sheep. We are not meant to be doormats, or weak in every way. But we win in this life through loving, through sacrificing, through being willing to suffer rather than disobey Jesus.

But notice that being a Christian isn't just about suffering or laying down our lives. Being a Christian means having access to God. Notice that the elders have "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." In the Old Testament, incense was regularly produced in the tabernacle and temple, where God dwelled among Israel. Here, we're told that the incense represents the prayers of the saints. (See also Rev. 8:3–4; Ps. 141:2.) The Bible says that all Christians are saints. All who put their trust in Christ have had their sins paid for, they are forgiven by God, and they are made holy. And their prayers reach God. We have access to God in prayer because of Jesus (Heb. 4:14–16). You can call upon God and have the promise that he hears your prayers because of Jesus—if you are united to Jesus through faith. That is an amazing privilege.

We should also see that Jesus not only ransoms his people from condemnation, but he has also made his people a kingdom and priests to God. We're priests (1 Pet. 2:9)! We represent the King! And we're not just part of his kingdom, but we also reign in his kingdom. There's a sense in which we reign now (Rev. 1:6; 20:6), but we will also reign in eternity. So, we may look very weak in the world's eyes, but we have a great status.

So, if you're a Christian, worship God like these elders, living creatures, and angels. Sing a new song to the Lord, praising him for salvation. And when I say worship God, I mean worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Or, to put it more precisely, worship the Father through the Son by the power of the Spirit. The triune God is worthy of our praise.

If you are not a Christian, I would urge you to think about where life is going. I don't just mean your life, though that's very important. I mean all of reality. Where is it going? Does it have meaning? If there is no God, there is no meaning to life. There is no one who gives reality purpose and hope. There is no evaluator of good and evil. There is no guarantee that things will get better. Everything will one day cease to exist, and all will be forgotten. The same end comes to Hitler and Gandhi, to Mussolini or Martin Luther King, Jr. If there is no God, at the end of the day, nothing really matters.

But there is a God. There are many good reasons to believe that God exists and that Christianity is true. I would love to share those reasons with you if you're interested. But know

this: Christianity claims that all of reality comes from Jesus and is directed to Jesus. He has the keys of history in his hands. Only Jesus can put you in a right relationship with God, so that you reign on earth forever.

Unlike other kings, Jesus lays down his life for his people. Jesus, the all-powerful Son of God, willingly laid down his life to ransom his people. He was led like a sheep to slaughter, not unwillingly, but knowing that it was the only way to rescue people from sin. Do you see the beauty of this? Jesus also ransoms people from every tribe, every language, every nation, regardless of skin color, gender, age, socioeconomic status, or even what the sins they have done.<sup>5</sup> If anyone trusts in Jesus, regardless of who they are or what they have done, they are forgiven, brought into God's family and kingdom, and given a bright future.

So, let us praise the Lamb who was slain. He is worthy.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Rev. 7:9; 14:6.