

## Revelation 5:1-10

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. <sup>2</sup> And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" <sup>3</sup> But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. <sup>4</sup> I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. <sup>5</sup> 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."

<sup>6</sup> 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<sup>(a)</sup> of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup> He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign<sup>(a)</sup> on the earth."

**Revelation** is not the easiest book to get into or understand, as you may know. Some of us may feel it is more obscuring than revealing — but it is revelatory, and, despite the seemingly relentless woes, is also a book of hope. I want to look at Revelation 5 with you today, decode some of it and generally chew on it, and hopefully find that we can find real encouragement in here...

Before we start, though, please hear my plea not to read Revelation literally. That was never its purpose. Just as Jesus doesn't tell us things straight, but puts them into parables and images, so Revelation does too. We need to put the work in, to decode the imagery.

Now in the passage we read, our focus is directed to the scroll held on God's open hand. Who is worthy to open it? No one... wait, don't be upset, there *is* one — the lamb who was wounded, the lion of Judah. Paradox abounds. Notice that the lamb still bears his wounds. Is this only there in the vision to indicate clearly who this is?

The scroll itself, we take to be the full revelation of God's judgement. It is, in other words, much of the rest of this book. The scroll is written on both sides — this was not normal with papyrus scrolls, so we are to understand that this is a full, complete revelation — nothing missing.

The scroll was sealed with seven seals. We would normally imagine these all to be on the outer edge — break all seven and you can read the scroll — but here the revelation is about to be given in stages, so they must somehow be present sequentially through the scroll, to be opened one at a time and each seal giving more of the revelation. Does the seventh seal reveal a game of chess with Death... or was that only in the Ingmar Bergman film?

How do we know the lamb is worthy to open the scroll? He is worthy because Jesus the lamb *has triumphed*. He has gained the victory in the battle of good and evil — and the final skirmishes are an ongoing and intense part of Revelations' story arc. The Elders, in their

worship go on and say more, that the Lamb is worthy because he has *redeemed* us, meaning he has paid the cost to set us free, and made us, who are every tribe and language, and people and nation to be a kingdom and priests, who will reign on earth, serving God.

The language about redemption has often bothered me, because it is easy to hear wrong connotations. You might say, 'purchased' or 'paid with his blood', or redeemed. But this is not 'paying off the devil'. Jesus did not pay off the devil to release us from his grip. Nor was this somehow a transaction between God's love and justice, whereby a price must be demanded to compensate for the rebellion, and the only one capable of paying this price is Jesus. For me, solving a justice issue with a gross injustice doesn't work, and we're in danger of seeing implying God has a split personality.

There is a difference between paying the price, and paying the cost.

If I am selling widgets, I set a *price*, and you must pay the price before you receive a widget. That price could be 100% markup, or 1000% markup — it's what I've decided it to be. But that widget also had a *cost* — the resources used, and the effort to make it. I cannot change the cost — the widget really did use those resources and that time. So when thinking of Jesus's redemption we must think of his paying the cost. Nothing was arbitrary about this, it really did *cost* Jesus suffering, humiliation and death, in order to free us from slavery to sin. This was the thing that was necessary for us to know God, know ourselves, know our sinfulness, and to conquer our sin in his strength. This is why the Lamb is worthy.

Two more things about this Lamb. Firstly — he has seven horns and seven eyes. Ugly lamb! What does it mean? In the code of Revelation horns are power and eyes are insight, seven means completeness. John has reminded us that the Lamb has all power and knowledge. Omnipotent and omniscient, we might say.

Our twenty-four elders in the throne room of God carry harps and golden bowls. The harps clearly enable their praise. What about the golden bowls? These are full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. I think this is a fabulous detail. Your prayers are incense in God's throne room, and are precious — held in golden bowls. They are the atmosphere.

Note that the elders' song is of the redemption of every tribe, language, people and nation. Note how careful John is in his total inclusiveness of all people. There is not a scheme or means of division that you might make to say that, 'these ones are in, but these are not'.

There **had** been major boundaries — these knew of their salvation, but these did not — but no, what is glorious about the Messiah's redemption is its comprehensiveness. God has reconstituted 'his people' and they look like Europeans and Africans and Asians and Latin Americans, men and women, young and old.

So the scroll is about to be opened — God's judgement. Is this all too scary? We must remember that we see these things only because Jesus *has already won the victory*. We are already *God's kingdom*, through this victory that frees us from sin. This judgement is therefore not 'against' us, for we know God loves us.

No, the judgement is really good news! We really crave justice in the world, and judgement means that. It means the exposure and correction of all the exploitation, injustice, coercion, and corruption. It means an end to all the crime and persecution. It means everyone's actions being brought into the light, *with love*. That means the chance for reconciliation, grace and healing. It means finally defeating our own sin, which we are so anxious for.

What about all the awful stuff? It is always *what is already happening*, the evil that already exists... but each cycle, each set of images ends in peace and victory. Each is framed in God's love, and the assurance of Jesus's victory.

What do we conclude? Revelation is a book of hope, a message of love from God to a struggling church to assure them that they *share* in his victory, and that their faithfulness *is making a difference* in bringing all things under God's loving rule. I want to assure you that *judgement is always good* — despite the guilty feelings you get when you think of judgement. It is always *judgement in love*. And I am always touched by the image of the golden bowls, holding the prayers of the faithful, which include your prayers and mine — the incense of God's throne room.

Cause enough for us to want to pray more, and more joyously perhaps? Amen.