

The Way of the Lamb

MJCF

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Revelation 5:1-14

We continue our look at the book of Revelation today, with chapter five. In the previous chapter, John, the writer, sees a vision of God's throne, with worshippers surrounding everything, praising God. Now, the worship expands to include Jesus Christ, who appears as a lamb. There's a lot of worship happening in these two chapters. To worship means to show honour, respect, and reverence. The English "worship" comes from "worth-ship" which means worthy. Starting in chapter four, God is worshipped with the words, "Holy, holy, holy..." This three-fold praise could correspond with the three exclamations of "worthy" which come later. We read, God, who created all things, is worthy to receive glory and honour, and power. Jesus the Lamb, is worthy "to take the scroll and open its seals." And, he is worthy "to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!" Jesus deserves worship because of the sacrifice he made, saving people from sin. It's through his suffering, death, and resurrection that he becomes a conqueror, and because of that, we gain a new and hopeful perspective on suffering.

Let's get into the details of today's reading. John sees a scroll in the right hand of the one sitting on the throne. There are actually a number of possible interpretations of what the scroll may mean. Some think it's the Book of Life, where are written all the names of the people who are saved for heaven. But after it is opened, as we'll see in the coming chapter, the content is mainly about judgement, and not the names of the redeemed people. Some believe that the judgements contained in the scroll are what will happen in the future at the end of the world. But, after the seals are broken, much of the judgements are things that have already been happening throughout history. There have been terrible wars, famine, and death. It's more likely that the scroll contains the plan for the salvation of God's people along with God's judgement on evil. This has begun through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as symbolized in the image of the Lamb. Like Jesus, those who are suffering will be exalted in the end.

The scroll is written on both sides, and has seven seals, symbolizing completeness, with nothing lacking. A seal would be like a signature, here in Canada, or like a family name stamp in Japan. It makes the document official. Being in God's right hand, it would have symbolised something with strength and power. We read that a "mighty angel" proclaims in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" This is a very important scroll! But we hear, "no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into it." The ancient understanding of the universe was that it had these three levels... In other words, no one in all creation was worthy to open the scroll.

At first, I wondered why John wept bitterly because of this. What's so important about being able to open some strange scroll? But, if the scroll contains God's plan for the salvation of God's people and judgement on evil, it is pretty important. If no one could open it, it could mean that God's plan would not be carried out. No one would be able to give purpose to the suffering and martyrdom of faithful people. Suffering would end up being meaningless. But then, one of the elders tells John there is someone who can open the scroll. This is Jesus, the one who is not part of creation, but one who was there with God, before the world was created. The elder gives Jesus two titles. He is "the Lion of the tribe of Judah," and "the Root of David." A lion would symbolize strength, courage, and majesty, and "the Root of David" would signify that he is a descendant of the great king David. Jesus is the fulfilment of the hopes of Israel, a new king to rule forever. Many expected the new Saviour to be a military hero, like David. Jesus is the one who "has conquered," and can open the scroll and its seals. But then, the surprise comes.

Jesus doesn't appear as the strong and fearful lion. He comes as "a Lamb, standing as if it had been slaughtered!" He "has conquered" not because he violently crushed all the enemies, but because he was consistently faithful, and non-violently resisted evil. This resistance led to his execution. He

suffered and died on the cross for our sin, and then rose to life. Note that the elder says that “he has conquered” not “he will conquer in the future.” Jesus, the Lamb has already triumphed over evil. He now reigns, and those who suffer will be exalted in the future. It’s a key theme in the book of Revelation - conquering not through violence, but through faithfully enduring suffering. Although, like a lamb, Jesus allowed himself to be vulnerable and faithfully followed the path to the cross, he was not weak. Here, he appears with seven horns and seven eyes. What a wild image! The seven horns represent complete and divine power. The eyes represent deep insight. Jesus is all-powerful and knows all things.

If you can imagine Jesus standing before Pilate, the governor who sent him to be hung on a cross, it would have looked like Jesus had no power while the governor had all the power. But, the reality was very different. Jesus says to Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." (John 19:11) I like a photo taken by a friend of mine that describes the reality of Jesus’ power. Since I don’t have it, I’ll describe it and I think you can get the idea. The picture is a close-up of Jesus’ feet standing in front of a tiny chess figure of a king symbolizing the governor. That gives a picture of the reality of who really has the power. Jesus had all the awesome power of God. He healed the sick, calmed a storm, and raised the dead. Yet, he gave himself to humanity and allowed himself to be tortured and killed, following God’s way of love to the cross. That is how Jesus conquered evil. He took it on himself. As he died on the cross, he prayed “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Three days later, God raised him to life, and he is now Lord of all.

Coming back to the images of Revelation, Jesus has power like a lion, but the way he has conquered evil is through the greater power of love, and consistent faithfulness to God in facing suffering. Jesus allowed himself to be vulnerable, like a lamb. He was killed, but because of his sacrifice, all people can now have a close relationship with God, with sins forgiven. In verse nine of our passage we read that Jesus, “ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation.” All over the world, believers are now a kingdom of priests. We reign together with Christ, and have access to a close relationship with our loving God, through Christ. Before Christ, people needed priests to connect with God. Now, Christians themselves are like priests, with access to God.

It’s hard to understand why we have evil and suffering in the world, today. Many Christians try to pretend that, as Christians they don’t suffer. Recently, I watched the movie “American Gospel” and I was quite impressed with the way they described Christian faith. Various pastors and Christian teachers challenged popular understandings of Christianity put forward by TV evangelists and many others. So many people believe that if you become a Christian you should have “abundant life,” meaning money, health, and success. Yet, the abundant life that the Bible teaches has more to do with the fruits of the spirit, things like deep peace, joy, and love. There are no promises that believers will not get sick or suffer. In fact, believers may experience more suffering than others because of persecution. God experienced it through Jesus on the cross. Suffering is a part of life, yet God is with us in our difficulties. I like the way one writer puts it:

At the Cross, we see the absolute uniqueness of the Christian response to suffering. In Islam, the idea of God suffering is nonsense—it is thought to make God weak. In Buddhism, to reach divinity is precisely to move beyond the possibility of suffering. Only in Christ do we have a God who is loving enough to suffer with us.

The loving parent is not the one who never allows suffering in a child’s life. The loving parent is the one who is willing to suffer alongside their children. And in Christianity this is exactly what we find. (*Oxford Teacher, Vince Vitale*)

Followers of Jesus Christ never need to face life’s difficulties alone. We may feel alone, but through the prayers of the church, and our own prayers, we can learn to see that Jesus walks with us. He may

even seem especially close when we are suffering. Jesus gave meaning to suffering. And, in his resurrection, we have the assurance that our suffering is not the end.

In today's passage we read that John hears the voice of many angels surrounding the throne, numbering "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice." This would have been an expression of the highest number known at the time. The number of those worshipping would have been countless! All creation joins in with the angels to worship. To all this, the four living creatures near God's throne say, "Amen!" In other words "Yesss!" This is awesome and wonderful. Let's pray.

Almighty God, through your Son Jesus, you have made a way for us to be a part of your kingdom. Thank-you that the way to truly conquer is not through violent power, but through faithfulness to you. Lord Jesus, thank-you for your sacrifice on the cross, that you've gone the way of suffering and shown us that there is a way through. O Lord, today there are many people who are suffering. In our faith community, some struggle with cancer or other health issues. Some are worrying about the future, loss of a job, or not enough money. Because of the pandemic, there is a lot of uncertainty about the future. In Japan, Lord, you know about the flooding that has happened. Many are suffering, and the pandemic has only made it worse for people to receive help. May those who are facing challenges sense your presence. Empower those who are working to improve difficult situations. And, grant us eyes to see where we can give care to those around us. We pray these things, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.