

Revelation 12

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Date: 16 June 2019

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Turn with me to the book of Revelation and chapter 5. Now, two or three weeks ago we were looking at chapter 4, and then I think last Sunday we had a little break from Revelation as we focused on Pentecost because of it being Pentecost Sunday.

But we're returning to this vision, and we're going to think about chapter 5. We're not going to read the chapter now, rather the manner in which we're going to preach the sermon is really walking through the chapter in a particular way and drawing out from it what I hope will be helpful and challenging and encouraging for us.

So, we began the tour maybe a month or so ago, and now the tour of heaven continues. And what I want you to do to draw the most from this exploration of heaven, this part of it, I want you to imagine yourself walking behind John.

John is the one who is being granted this vision. There in chapter 4, we remind ourselves of how this part of the vision began.

John, there in verse 1 of chapter 4, we read, After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.

[1 : 36] And so, John is, as it were, transported by or through the means of a vision to witness this heavenly reality.

And the tour continues. And we're going to walk behind John. But imagine that you're walking behind John, and yet you're unable to see what John is seeing.

And so, at every turn, you have to ask him what he is seeing. You're there, you're interested, you're fascinated, but you can't see it for yourself. You rely on John to share with you.

And that's really what's happening as we read the chapter. But I want to make it as vivid as possible, and so I invite you to imagine you're there walking behind him. And at every point, you ask him, What have you seen?

What have you seen now? What more have you just seen? Tell me what you are being shown. And as we listen to John, as he tells us what he sees in his vision, every so often, we'll need to press the pause button and reflect on the significance of what John is seeing and sharing with us.

[2 : 48] If we don't pause every so often, the sight that we are shared will be too much for us to process. And so, as I say, every so often, we'll pause and just reflect on what it is that John is sharing with us and the significance of it.

Well, I hope you're sitting comfortably because we're in for quite a ride as we make our way through this chapter, chapter 5 of Revelation. And the chapter begins with John declaring, Then I saw. John, this expression that will repeat itself time and again throughout the book is really a marker. It's a marker that is indicating to us that there is a new discovery to be had as this panorama of heaven is laid out before us.

And so, we have to ask that question of John for the first time. John, what are you seeing now? What are you seeing now, John?

And how does John respond to our question? Well, he responds along these lines. I see the one seated on the throne holding a scroll in his right hand with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.

[4 : 11] And the scroll that I see is resting on his hand as if he is waiting for somebody to receive it from him. That's what John sees.

Well, we've hardly started, and yet we already need to press the pause button and ask some questions and explore some of what is being said to us, particularly regarding the scroll.

What is this scroll that John sees resting on the right hand of the one seated on the throne? Now, we've discovered already that the vision is replete with references to and allusions to the Old Testament.

And here it would seem that the vision portrays the fulfillment of Daniel's 500-year-old prophetic vision. At the end of the book of Daniel, we read in the final chapter, Daniel is given these instructions.

In chapter 12 of Daniel, and in verses 4 and 9, I just draw together the two verses. Daniel is instructed in this way, But you, Daniel, roll up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end, because the words are rolled up and sealed until the end of time or until the end times.

[5 : 30] So, Daniel was told to roll up the scroll, not to open the scroll, to keep it sealed. But now, 500 years or so have passed, and the time has come for the scroll to be unsealed and for its contents to be revealed.

And this is the scroll that Daniel sees in heaven, still sealed and the contents still unknown to all but the one holding the scroll.

But that is all about to change. Indeed, in the following chapters, the seals will be opened one by one, and the contents of the scroll will be revealed. And we'll make our journey through that in the weeks and months that lie ahead.

But if we had to summarize at this point, the contents of this scroll, if we had to, in a few words, explain what it is that will be revealed by the opening of the seals and the revelation of the contents of the scroll, we would do well to answer in this scroll.

The scroll is best understood as containing God's plan for the restoration of this broken world, a plan that will involve judgment.

[6 : 50] Indeed, in Revelation, judgment figures prominently, but not just judgment, but also redemption. The two really go together. A plan that will involve judgment and redemption, and a plan which has been set in motion by the death and resurrection of Jesus, but that will continue to unfold through to His return and indeed beyond.

This is what the scroll is about. This is what the scroll will reveal when it is opened for us. So, this is a big deal, and it's all in the scroll.

If we had to try and think of some kind of parallel, and it's almost impossible to find a parallel because this is such a huge deal. There are no real parallels. But, you know, before elections, and who knows, maybe we're coming up to an election soon.

We'll see. The political parties have their manifestos, and in the manifestos, they lay out their plans for the years that lie ahead. Of course, one of the great problems with that is you can't trust the plans.

Even when they are well-intentioned, even when there is a genuine desire to fulfill the plans that are put in the bit of paper, so often circumstances dictate that it proves impossible to do so, and plans change, and promises are not kept, and circumstances overtake.

[8 : 16] Well, in the scroll, you have God's plan, His grand plan that will unfold through the last days, and it is altogether trustworthy, altogether reliable.

Well, having paused for a moment just to think about the scroll and what this scroll is all about, we can press the play button again and continue to interrogate John with another question.

And the questions really will be very similar because really what we want him to do is to tell us what he is seeing. And so we ask John again, what else are you seeing, John? What else are you seeing?

And John replies, I see an angel proclaiming in a loud voice, Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?

And again, we're going to have to pause and think a little bit about this question that the angel proclaims in a loud voice.

[9 : 17] Why is nobody able to receive and open the scroll? The one seated on the throne is holding out the scroll. It's resting on his right hand. He wants somebody to take it and to open it and to reveal its contents.

But the angel declares or asks the question, Who is worthy to break the seals and to open the scroll? And concludes that there is no one worthy.

And why is no one able to open the scroll? Well, there in verse 4 we're told that one of the conditions to be able to take and open the scroll is that the one who does so must be worthy.

In what follows, and we'll think about this in a moment, we read how John wept, Because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or to look inside.

And the language that is used here is the language that speaks of complete and absolute inability. Nobody comes even close to being worthy for such a task.

[10:25] Nobody is able to even contemplate taking and opening the scroll and unsealing the seals. No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.

All, altogether unworthy to do so. But back to the vision. Now, we can only see what John tells us, but we can maybe hear the sound.

And the sound that we hear as we walk behind him is the sound of inconsolable weeping. And it is John who is weeping. In his own words, he declares, I wept and wept.

And so that arouses in us the curiosity to ask John, Why so? And so we do. John, why are you weeping?

Heaven is no place for weeping. Why are you weeping? And what answer does John give us? Well, he tells us, I'm weeping because nobody is worthy to open the scroll.

[11:42] That's why I'm weeping. The scroll is there. It's there resting in the hand of God, the one seated on the throne. But there's nobody worthy to open the scroll.

And so I weep. And again, we need to pause and think, Why? Why is John weeping? Or why does the absence of anyone worthy to open the scroll produce in John such distress?

We'd perhaps prefer it if John was just a little more explicit as to the reason for his weeping. But I think we can come to a well-grounded conclusion.

I think the reason for John's weeping is twofold, though the two elements are very much connected. I think John is weeping almost in despair at the prospect, not only of being denied the opportunity to discover what is in the scroll, because evidently if there's nobody able to take it and open it, then John will be denied the opportunity to know what is inside.

And he wants to see what's inside. And so he weeps because he fears that that will be denied him because there's no one worthy to open the scroll. So he weeps for that reason.

[13:01] But I think he also weeps, and perhaps even more significantly, he is weeping at the prospect that the very purposes of God outlined in the scroll will be left unfulfilled, as a result of no one being able to not only open the scroll, but to oversee the unfolding of the purposes contained in the scroll.

And so John weeps. And this is a critical moment. The very destiny of humanity and the cosmos is on the line. And so John weeps.

But back to the vision. And there follows now a moment of high drama. And let's inquire again of John.

Let's ask him again the same question that we will repeat time and time again. John, what are you seeing now? What are you seeing now? And John replies, I'm not seeing anything.

But one of the elders is speaking to me. He's urging me not to weep, and he's calling me to look and see the lion of the tribe of Judah and the root of David who has triumphed.

[14:16] I'm to stop weeping, and I'm to look at the one so described. Well, again, we need to pause, having been told of what John was instructed by the angel.

Who is this lion of the tribe of Judah? Who is this one described as the root of David? Well, again, we need to turn to the Old Testament to find the clues that will help us identify the one so described. We first encounter a reference to the lion of the tribe of Judah in Genesis chapter 49, where Jacob is blessing his sons.

Jacob is about to die, and he has a blessing for each of his sons. And in the context of pronouncing these blessings, he comes to Judah. Now, we've been hearing about Judah in the evening service, and he was far from being an upright and exemplary figure.

And yet, to Judah, that is given this promise, this blessing. We can just read what we find there in Genesis 49, in verses 9 and 10. You are a lion's cub, Judah.

[15:31] You return from the prey, my son. Like a lion, he crouches and lies down. Like a lioness, who dares to rouse him? And then very especially what follows, the scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come, and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

So, you have this remarkable blessing where Jacob is blessing one of his sons. And yet, the language that he employs so evidently goes way beyond anything that could have been true only of

his son Judah.

It points forward to another, the lion of the tribe of Judah, from whom the scepter, the staff of government and authority would not depart, the one to whom the nations would bring their honor and obedience.

And so, the blessing points forward to the coming Messiah, the lion of the tribe of Judah. We find in the blessing that Jacob grants to his son a prophetic anticipation of the coming of Messiah, the seed of the woman who would strike the head of the serpent.

And the Messiah would trace his descent from Judah. But then we have the language of the root of David. And here, the reference in the Old Testament is not as clear and as explicit, but it certainly would seem to be echoing the messianic prophecy of Isaiah chapter 11 concerning a branch or shoot from Jesse, David's father, of whom Isaiah declares in that chapter in Isaiah 11, the spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding.

[17:17] This is the language also found in Isaiah 61, which Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth declares as fulfilled in his person and in his coming.

So, the one found worthy to open the scroll, the one who John's attention is directed to is the Messiah.

He is Messiah Jesus. He, the angel declares, has triumphed. The very thing that the people of God are urged to do in every one of the letters that we've been making our way through week by week, to overcome, to triumph.

Well, he has already triumphed. He has triumphed altogether. And he is the one who is able to take the scroll and open its seven seals.

Well, let's return to the vision. John has been urged by the angel to see the lion of the tribe of Judah. And so, John, even as he, I imagine, dries the tears from his weeping that he might see more clearly, turns to fix his eyes upon the lion.

[18:33] His interest has been aroused. There is excitement as he contemplates the prospect of witnessing this lion of whom the angel speaks, the one worthy to open the scroll.

And so, he turns his attention to the lion. And so, we ask John again, tell us, John, what's the lion like?

And John, almost dumbstruck by what he sees, mumbles in reply, the lion's a lamb. The lion's a lamb. As we read in the chapter, Then I saw a lamb, looking as if it had been slain.

This is a moment of high drama in the vision, in the account. We are being made privy to the identity of the one worthy to take the scroll and open the seals.

The one worthy to direct the unfolding and outworking of God's purposes and plan. We want to see a lion, but we're shown a lamb, a lamb dripping in blood, a lamb as if slain.

[19:45] A lion king is announced, but John turns and he sees a bloody lamb. And we need to pause and we need to ask, well, what is going on?

What is going on? Is the one worthy a lion or a lamb? Well, he's both. But his worthiness derives principally from his identity as the slain lamb.

Why a lamb? Well, to understand the significance of the Messiah being identified as a slain lamb, we need to be reminded of at least two significant Old Testament events and Old Testament passages.

There are perhaps more that we could bring to bear on this image, but two stand out. We've read already earlier in the service from Exodus chapter 12.

And you remember the Exodus. And as I say, we've read of the occasion when the Israelites were about to be rescued and delivered from captivity in Egypt.

[20:52] And how the firstborn of Israel were protected by the blood of the Passover lamb painted on the doorposts of their homes.

And all those who trusted in God's instructions for protection from the plague were indeed delivered from God's judgment.

The shed blood of the Passover lamb granted them protection. And Jesus is our Passover lamb. His shed blood protects us from the just judgment of God.

But then as we think of this picture of a slain lamb, we're also drawn to the words of the prophet Isaiah concerning the coming Messiah, Isaiah identified as a suffering servant.

In Isaiah chapter 53, we have this portrayal of the Messiah as a suffering servant, a very unexpected, almost scandalous portrayal of the coming Messiah.

[21 : 56] And we're familiar with the language of that prophecy. We pick up the reading in verse 4 of Isaiah 53. Surely He took up our pain and bore our suffering. Yet we considered Him punished by God, stricken by Him and afflicted.

But He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on Him. And by His wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way. And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. And very especially what follows, He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth.

He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth. The suffering servant, the slain lamb, crushed for our iniquities, pierced for our transgressions.

God's purposes, God's grand plan, all revolve around Jesus. And very particularly are centered on the cross where Jesus died.

[23 : 10] The cross and what transpired there is the crux of the matter. It's on the cross that Jesus offered up His life as a ransom for many. It was on the cross that the justice of God was satisfied.

It was on the cross that sin was dealt with and forgiveness was secured for sinners, for you and me. And the appearance of a slain lamb in heaven serves to establish the centrality of the cross in the purposes of God.

And it is a subversive message. The weakness, shame, and folly of the cross proves to be the power and wisdom and grace of God in its ultimate and most eloquent expression.

But let's return to the vision and inquire further of John. And so we ask John another question. Tell us more. Tell us more about the lamb. And John replies, well, he's no ordinary lamb.

He has the appearance of a lamb that has been slain, but he is very much alive. He is at the center of the throne, surrounded by the living creatures and the elders.

[24 : 27] And he has seven horns and seven eyes. And so as the lamb is described to us, we have to pause and just think again and consider what this description is saying to us, what it means for us.

Now when the lamb is spoken of as having these seven eyes, and these seven eyes are in the chapter itself, identified as the seven spirits of God or the sevenfold spirit of God.

This is language that we've come across already in at least a couple of occasions in Revelation.

And on those occasions, we were identifying these seven spirits or the sevenfold spirits as the Holy Spirit of God.

And here again, it's best to understand the Holy Spirit as the one being spoken of in this description of Jesus. And perhaps even the seven horns that speak of the power of Jesus can also be together with the seven eyes being understood as referring to the strength of the lamb as it finds expression in the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe to try and summarize that in a way that's clear, I hope is clear. The slain lamb, by the image of the seven horns and the seven eyes, the slain lamb is all-powerful.

[25 : 58] It seems a strange thing to say of a slain lamb, but the one as slain is all-powerful, all-knowing. The seven eyes speak of His all-knowing.

He's all-present. And these attributes are made visible or effective in the working of the Holy Spirit. For the lamb to both open the scroll and to direct the unfolding of the purposes of God laid out in the scroll, He counts on the aid of the Holy Spirit, who we are told is sent out into all the earth.

We need to ask John to tell us more. Our next question is simply this, John, what happens next?

And John replies, the lamb is taking the scroll, and the living creatures and the elders are falling down before the lamb and are singing a new song of praise to the lamb.

And we ask John again, but John, what are they singing? What are they singing? And he answers in the words that are recorded for us in verses 9 and 10 of chapter 5. And they sang a new song saying, You are worthy to take the scroll.

The lion of the tribe of Judah, the lamb as if slain, 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.

[27 : 28] You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God. And they will reign on the earth. That is what they sing. That is the praise that they direct to the lamb.

I mean, to pause again, for in this new song, we are given the reasons why the lamb is deemed to be worthy to take and to open the scroll. And what are the reasons? Well, they're there. They're very clear. Because You were slain. The worthiness of the lamb is grounded in the first instance not on His identity or His attributes, but on this astonishing reality that He has been slain. The Father deems His Son worthy because of the cross, because His precious Son was obedient even unto death and death on a cross, so He is worthy to take the scroll and to open the seals. And the praise continues, and with Your blood You purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. The significance of the cross rests on what was achieved by and at Calvary.

[28 : 41] By His death on the cross, Jesus purchased a people for God. Jesus paid the price of our sin and so rescued us from captivity to its grip and guilt.

We're reminded of the manner in which Paul exhorted the believers in Corinth to live holy lives, reminding them that they were blood-bought people.

In 1 Corinthians 6, in verses 19 and 20, we read, Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own.

You were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies. Bought at a price. We have been purchased by the slain Lamb.

He's paid the price of our redemption by His blood shed on the cross. And notice the splendid diversity of those purchased by the blood of the Lamb, persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

[29 : 47] The church of Jesus Christ is or certainly ought to be the ultimate expression of diversity in this world. There's so much sham diversity that we are sold to us.

But here we have true diversity in those bought at a price by the Lamb as slain. And there is a purpose to those so bought.

Because the praise continues, You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God. We have been purchased with a purpose to be a kingdom, to be priests in the service of God.

But back to the vision and one more question for John. This is the final question we're going to pose to him. John, can you see anything else? And John replies, Oh yes, there is more.

I can see and hear the voice of millions and millions of angels together with the living creatures and the elders encircling the throne and praising the Lamb. And what is it that they cry?

[30 : 55] Well, we have the words that they cry there recorded in verse 12. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.

But there's more. John also informs us, I can see and hear every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea all praising the Lamb, saying, to Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever.

And as we ponder on this explosion of praise on the part of the angels and of the living creatures and of the elders, as we pause and consider the content of it, we witness an evolving and revealing richness to the heavenly praise directed to the Lamb.

If we notice first, very fleeting, the content of the praise. And maybe the one thing we want to stress and highlight is how the praise offered to the Lamb echoes the praise that has previously already been offered to the one seated on the throne.

When we were thinking of chapter 4, we notice in verse 11 of chapter 4 how this praise is directed to the one seated on the throne, to God. You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.

[32 : 23] And then we hear the praise directed to the one slain, to the Lamb. And we find that it echoes the same language. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.

The praise that God is due, the Lamb is also due. And this is hugely significant in terms of recognizing the identity of the Lamb as the eternal Son of God, worthy of praise in the same manner as the one seated on the throne.

There is perhaps significance in the manner in which the praise directed to the Lamb is sevenfold in character. We know how that number is a recurring one in Revelation.

Indeed, we've already come across it in this chapter. But in verse 12, when all the reasons why the Lamb is worthy are listed, we find seven. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and

wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.

He is worthy to receive praise that is perfect and complete for He is a perfect and sufficient and divine Savior.

[33 : 46] But then in the praise of all the creatures, there is a further startling, but we might say necessary development of the picture painted. There we find that the one seated on the throne and the Lamb receive the same praise.

It's not simply that on one occasion we find the one seated on the throne praised in a particular way, and then we find the Lamb praised in a similar or even identical way, but now we find them both together.

Notice there in verse 13, to Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever.

The Lamb is presented as both with and as God. And it almost comes as an echo of what we read at the beginning of John's Gospel. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

Well, here we have the Lamb. He's with God. receiving the praise of heaven and He is God and so is due the praise of heaven. There's only so much of this vision of heaven that we can take in one sitting and we need to pause and process all that we have seen.

[35 : 01] And as we do, what is our response? What must be our response? What must be at the heart of our response? Well, we must join with the living creatures and cry out, Amen.

And we must accompany the elders as they fall down and worship and cry to Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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