

FGBC: Lamb of Thrones: Look! A Lamb

Revelation 5
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Welcome to the first weekend of 2020! My kids found out this means it's 356 more sleeps until Christmas. It also means we are returning to our series in Revelation. So grab your Bible or open the one on your phone to Revelation chapter 1. Let's do a little re-cap:

Jesus' youngest disciple, John, is about 85 as he writes this, and he's incarcerated on the island prison of Patmos – he will die here completely separated from everyone he loves.

Of course, by this time almost everyone he loves is already dead. Matthew was impaled by spears in Ethiopia. James was thrown off a wall and then clubbed to death. Jude, Peter, Simon and Andrew were crucified. Other James and Matthias were beheaded. Philip was hung upside down and impaled by iron hooks. And Bartholomew was flayed to death by whip.¹ Jesus' closest disciples died refusing to deny that God became a man to die in our place that we might really live.

John spent his life thinking about this, and then one Sunday afternoon as he was worshipping out on the rock he hears a voice behind him that tells him "Write on a scroll what you see." And the voice is loud like the sound of rushing water.

And so, like you would probably do, he turns around. And he sees something that sets everything else he's experienced in life in perspective. John dies in total peace out on Patmos because of the vision he recorded for us in Revelation.

But the best thing about what John saw was that it wasn't primarily for him, it was for the church – for us. That's why the first words spoken are "write this down." And what this means is that Jesus' message to John in this book is not some abstract vision that can't be figured out – that's what a lot of people think Revelation is – instead it is a message of clarity Jesus designed to enable every Christian to thrive in the world of difficulty we face.

And it worked. While the first few centuries of the church were full of persecution from the secular world and the religious one, the church exploded from a few thousand to millions. Revelation worked. And it still works.

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So what did he see?

¹ From tradition as recorded on <http://so4j.com/twelve-disciples-of-jesus> (Accessed January 2, 2020)

Well when John turned around he saw Jesus, not as He was – not the humble carpenter’s son. Not the Suffering Servant. But Jesus as He is today – the sovereign sustainer of the universe in absolute control. His eyes are alert and flashing fire. His boots are bronze and powerful enough to stamp out any resistance. In His hands He holds seven stars. And He’s right here, walking among the seven golden lampstands of His church.

And then Jesus starts speaking, and He speaks 7 letters to the seven churches of Asia and the church of all time. And His message is both encouraging and challenging because He knows what is going on in His church.

So Jesus says things like “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance... - good – yet I hold this against you; you have forsaken the love you had at first...” Ever realized you were still doing all the right religious stuff but your passion for Jesus wasn’t there? Jesus says: “Repent and do the things you did at first.” He doesn’t want our service or gifts, He wants our love.

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And He continues: “I know your afflictions and your poverty... I know you live where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to My name” – good. Jesus knows what we face. Yet He also knows we are complex characters – none of us are 100% good. And so with the next breath He calls us out in love. “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you.... you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains.”

Jesus’ blazing eyes see everything which means perseverance gets rewarded and laziness isn’t excused. That’s the sobering reality, but the good news is that no matter what difficulty we are in the middle of, no matter how devastating the trouble we face, we can have confidence that Jesus is in control, and He’s good.

You see Satan is powerful, but he’s on a chain – he’s a tool. And so one day it will be shown that the most diabolical acts he has put in motion all play parts in God’s good plan – can you believe it? That’s the glasses Revelation gives Jesus followers.

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And so what I want to do now is look at Revelation 5, which is where we left off at the end of November.

So Revelation 4 and 5 mark a transition in John’s vision. Jesus isn’t writing letters to His churches anymore, He’s showing John what’s going on in the throne room of the universe right now. And this puts everything in perspective.

So yes Nero and Domitian were killing Christians in the first century. And yes the financial and relational and spiritual and physical problems you and your family are facing are real. But they aren’t the most real reality.

There is another layer. There is a throne, an awesome and powerful throne, and there is someone on the throne. And it's God – the fullness of God. And all creation is doing His bidding. All the celestial realm is worshipping at His feet. There is no contest in the throne room. There is no struggle for control. Instead infinite power emanates from the center of the throne and does as it pleases. And then we get to chapter 5.

Would you stand with me as we read the word of the Lord. Revelation 5 starting in verse 1:

[Read Revelation 5:1-14]

There are two sections to this chapter. The first sets up a problem and the second answers it. So look first at verses 1 to 5.

John begins by looking at the One who is sitting on the throne from chapter 4. And in His right hand is a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. Now this language should already be a little familiar.

So the scroll contains the destiny of the world – everything God has determined will happen. And the scroll is sealed with seven seals. This is the number of completion – we've seen this before. Numbers have meaning in apocalyptic literature.

So the seven churches are all the churches and the seven spirits of God are all of God. That's the point. And so here all the destiny of the world is in God's hand. This scroll contains God's plan for fixing everything that is wrong in the world and bringing about His kingdom.

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Now by default God's plan means judgment for wickedness. And this means everything is finally going to make sense. All the evil dictators and their wicked abuses are going to appear as pieces in God's puzzle. When this scroll gets read every hardship you have experienced, every 'premature death', every broken relationship, every struggle with doubt – everything will be shown to play a role in God's plan.

So let me ask you, are there any aspects of your life that don't make sense? Have you ever experienced anything that doesn't seem fair and doesn't seem to have any reason behind it? This scroll in God's hand makes sense of all of that. It contains all the order behind the chaos. Things are not as they seem.

Wouldn't you love to get your hands on that scroll?... John sure would. There's a few things that don't add up in his life. He's been following God faithfully and he's in jail. So open that scroll!

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But there's a problem. This huge angel walks into the scene, and his job is to ask a question. "Who can open the scroll? Who is worthy to reveal God's plan of salvation and set His judgment in motion?"

And the call goes out to all of heaven and earth – the angel has a loud voice. Everyone hears and is able to respond, but nobody can. Nobody's worthy.

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At first John is just watching this, then all of a sudden he's totally overcome. It's hopeless. There will be no justice. There might as well be no plan because nobody can open God's scroll to get at it.

And so John disintegrates into tears. He weeps and weeps. It's total devastation. In this moment John tastes the hopelessness of the world without God – it's all meaningless. There is no plot. There is no future. It is just random chance stacked on random chance. It is just survival of the fittest. The strong eat the weak. Every Hitler and Stalin, every murderer and rapist are just the big wolves consuming prey. There is no good and evil, only survival.

This is what John sees and he's destroyed. He falls to the floor in tears. But then there's this extra who gets a line. I love this. One of the elders. Just some dude sitting on one of the 24 thrones around the throne. And he leans over and pokes John in the ribs and say: "Woah, woah, woah. You didn't see it yet John. Yeah, there's nobody else. But look the Lion of Judah, the Root of David is getting up. And He's got this."

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Last time we were in Revelation we talked about the most common command in the book, which is the word "Behold. Look. See." It's not a suggestion, it's a command. It's the command that changes everything about life as we know it.

We don't have to be afraid. We aren't doomed to hopelessness. We can endure what appears to be chaotic, random violence because, look, there is another reality. Real reality is that the Lion of Judah is getting up.

Now "Lion of Judah" and "Root of David" are messianic images that were popular in the first century. So in Genesis 49 Jacob is blessing his 12 sons, and he says of Judah:

Judah, my son, is a young lion...
 Like a lion he crouches and lies down;
 like a lioness—who dares to rouse him?
 The scepter will not depart from Judah,
 nor the ruler's staff from his descendants,
 until the coming of the One to whom it belongs,
 the One whom all nations will honor. (Genesis 49:9-10)

That's a prophecy about Jesus written down 1400 years before He was born. And "the Root of David" is another prophecy, this time from Isaiah. We usually read this one at Christmas. It says:

Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—
 yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.
 And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him—
 the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
 the Spirit of counsel and might,
 the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. (Isaiah 11:1-2)

God's plan has always been that someone is going to fix this mess. And so the elder leans over to John and says, "Hey, stop weeping. Look! The Lion of Judah, the Root of David has triumphed. He can open the scroll."

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And this is where we get one of the most mind-wrenching changes of imagery in literature – not just scripture. And this is where the second part of this chapter begins – verse 6.

John looks, and what's he expecting to see? A lion, roaring and powerful. He expects to see Jesus from chapter 1 – bronze boots, a flaming sword. Somebody who means business.

And instead he sees a Lamb – a baby sheep – looking as if it had been slain. This is the meekest most unimpressive thing ever. It's Mary's little lamb² that's who's going to open the scroll. It seems ridiculous. But it's complicated. Look again at verse 6

[Read Revelation 5:6]

The picture holds all sorts of opposites together. It's a sacrificed Lamb, but eyes are a picture of wisdom and horns are a picture of strength. And we've got that number 7 again. So it's all the wisdom and all the strength tied up in this itty-bitty package. And the Lamb is in the very center of the four living creatures – the Lamb is the Lion on the throne, and He overcame by sacrificing Himself on our behalf. That's why He's worthy.

And this Lamb just goes and takes the scroll and all creation breaks into choruses of "Worthy, worthy is the Lamb, who was slain.... To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, forever." This is going on right now.

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Now I want to step back and look at why what John sees changes everything. There's a lot here, but I'll unpack three things:

First, when you see what John sees you realize that whatever it is you are experiencing, God gets it. He understands. We worship the suffering God. Like Isaiah says:

He was despised and rejected—
 a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. (Isaiah 53:3)

² Darrell Johnson "Discipleship on the Edge" pg 146.

And this means that you aren't alone in your suffering. The Lamb is there with you, in fact He is allowing your difficulty to continue. Friends, it is fair to credit God, as Job does, with being the source of the difficulty we experience. He gives you what you have, and He takes away.

And in the moment none of this suffering makes sense – that's true. But here in Revelation 5 we see that He isn't an ogre, reveling in our pain. He isn't getting a kick out of watching us suffer. It hurts Him too. In fact He walks through the valley of the shadow of death with us. He takes our pain upon Himself. And He bears the scars to prove it. He's the Lamb as though slain today. So He knows. Jesus feels your pain.

But He's also the one who has come out the other side. He's victorious, which means His plans work – ever made a plan that just totally didn't work out? Not Jesus.

So yes, there is pain and mystery in your suffering, but there's no mystery for Jesus. He's got this. He's got you. And in fact the pain you are experiencing is His plan for your good. This might not make sense right now but trust Him.

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We trust God by deciding to live in His victory. You see the Lamb is on the throne. There is no battle, there is no contest for control. He is bringing about everything written on the scroll – this is happening right now. So choose to worship even though you don't understand.

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Second, with Revelation 5 glasses on we can see where all history is headed – it's headed to the feet of the Lamb. His nail-scarred hands hold the scroll. And when He breaks the seals we find out that everything – every single thing that has happened to you and around you – serves His purposes – everything.

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Now here's the difficult part of this. Sometimes God takes our suffering away. Miraculously, or non-miraculously He brings about our deliverance, our healing our restoration. Sometimes this happens. And when it happens we praise God and give Him glory for what He has done. Right?

But, sometimes our suffering doesn't go away. Sometimes the bad stuff that has happened to us doesn't just get fixed. But if it doesn't it is still true that every single thing we experience serves His purpose and is for our good. And that's true even if we die. You see there is no health and wealth gospel here. The message of scripture is not that if you are holy and righteous then you will be healthy and rich.

That's not how it works. Every disciple suffered incredible pain. John ended up on Patmos, but he didn't get off easy. Jewish historian Tertullian writes that prior to John being banished on Patmos Emperor Domitian had brought him to the coliseum to make a spectacle of him. And there he boiled him alive in oil.³

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_the_Apostle (Accessed January 3, 2020)n

But John didn't die like he was supposed to. And instead thousands of people in the coliseum converted to Christ – imagine how frustrating that was for Domitian! And so he banished him to Patmos. Here's the point: Jesus allowed these godly people to suffer to death. So there is no promise that your suffering is going to diminish.

The promise is that your suffering won't be for nothing. There is a purpose, and not just an abstract purpose. The Lamb has a purpose. And the purpose is for your good and His glory. And this will come to pass because it is written in the seven-sealed-scroll. Ultimately all of history, even your history, will bow at the feet of the Lamb.

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And this leads me to the final reason Revelation 5 changes everything. When we see what John sees we realize that the way to abundant life is the way of the Lamb. This is the law of the cosmos. The Lion gets the throne, but He gets there by being the Lamb.

Remember Jesus isn't a fool. He didn't wander onto earth naively wishing He could make things different – no! Jesus didn't have high hopes but then found Himself overwhelmed by evil and forced to the cross – no! He's got seven eyes. The Lamb who was slain knows everything. And He's got seven horns. All the power in the universe belongs to Him.

And what this means is that there is a secret here – a mystery. The greatest power in the universe isn't atomic energy or military might. The greatest power in the universe is the weakness of sacrificial love and the greatest wisdom in the world is the foolishness of sacrificial love.⁴

And this mystery governs the universe whether we acknowledge it or not. You see in this world it seems like the greedy get ahead. In this world the abusers are often uncaught. In this world sickness and death often get the upper hand. But things are not what they seem. In the end Jesus wins. Actually Jesus has already won. And He did it through sacrificial love.

And so, if you want to win you must abandon the wisdom of this world and embrace the wisdom of the Lamb. He's the one who knows how everything works, and He says "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."⁵

And the world cries foolishness! Weakness! But they are looking through the wrong glasses. Put on the Revelation 5 glasses and see what is really real. Friends, the vision Jesus gave John is for us, and it changes everything.

⁴ Darrell Johnson, pg 150

⁵ Matthew 5:3