Series: A Call to Worship on Earth as in Heaven (a study in Revelation 4-5)
Sermon Text: Revelation 5:8-10 **Slido Poll:** How would you define worship?

Last week's lesson ended in ***verse 7*** where ***the Lamb*** (Jesus) ***took the seven-sealed scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne*** (God, the Father). We found out that the ***scroll*** contains God's comprehensive and complete redemptive plan--a final verdict and sentence that will restore fallen creation. 1st century believers would've been greatly relieved to hear that God's long-promised plan was unfolding before their eyes. Their cities, after all, were filled with people doing all sorts of terrible things and temples where everyone was expected to pledge allegiance to mythological gods, goddesses, and ultimately the Roman Emperor--refusal to participate was detrimental socially and economically! It was hard to believe what Jesus did on the cross made any difference whatsoever and much easier to just go with the flow. John's vision reminds them and us that, regardless of how things may seem, God deserves to be worshiped above all because the death of His Son (***the Lamb***) changed everything from that day forward! To see this, though, requires faith--a life-long openness to discovering who God is and how He operates in a real-time relationship without demanding things be done our way and within our timetables. ***Chapters 5***, then, is designed to challenge our concept of the infinite God and whether our assessments of Him are true! For starters, ***verses 1-7*** inspire us to **worship Him who conquered by sacrificing and dying, not by arguing and fighting**. Today, ***verses 8-10*** will provoke us toward this…

BIG IDEA: Worship Him whose death became a worldwide Exodus.

This passage aims to simultaneously stir our intellect and affections with 3 ***songs*** (heavenly hymns) offered in worship to God by 3 distinct groups: The living creatures and the elders (5:8-10), then the angelic creatures (5:11–12), then all creation (5:13–14). While each song is packed with information about God, the goal isn't merely to inform but to also transform those who receive this fresh revelation of who God is. If, after hearing this, our insides aren't deeply moved to respond on some level like those in the 3 groups, then we've missed the point entirely! We won't even try to cover the 2nd and 3rd songs this week, so that we can wallow in the magnificent truths in this 1st song. So, without further ado, let's dive headfirst into ***verse 8***: ***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.*** <u>What could their priestly work be meant to convey?</u> At the very least, God was revealing to 1st century believers and us that <u>heaven hears and holds our songs, prayers, and cries</u> for things like justice, answers, relief, salvation, and vindication (cf. 6:10)! ***Golden bowls*** signify the

contents being held (identified as ***prayers***) are precious, and fragrant ***incense*** suggests that God breathes in our longings as He did with Old Testament sacrifices (cf. Exodus 29:18; Ephesians 5:2).

Continuing in ***verses 9-10***: ***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, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."*** This ***new song*** celebrates the impact of what it meant for Jesus, ***the Lamb***, to be ***slain*** using very specific terms from the Exodus story where God rescued His people from Egypt. Understanding this connection reveals much about God and the salvation He offers. History tells us the Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt for about 400 years until God called Moses to lead them to freedom. In the last of 10 plagues against Pharaoh, God promised to rescue whoever displayed faith by placing ***the blood of a slain lamb*** over their doorpost--God expected their faith to be evident in their bodily activities! Notice also what God told them afterwards in Exodus 19:5-6: "*Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*." Here's the point: John was using Exodus terms to emphasize 3 of the miracles God accomplished by ***the blood of the Lamb*** which, by the way, is a fitting subject for us to explore on this week leading up to Easter!

First, the ***song*** in ***verses 9-10*** includes the phrase ***by your blood you ransomed people for God***. In biblical usage, ***ransoms*** were paid to free a slave or a captive; but notice how this ***song*** emphasizes a change in ownership--***people are ransomed FOR God*** (i.e., to be a treasured possession as we just read in Exodus 19). So, this ***song*** reminds us how God redeems things that He created so they can stop serving sinful purposes and be restored to God's original design for them. This concept is more plainly explained in Romans 6:19-23 (NLT) which says: "*Because of the weakness of your human nature, I am using the illustration of slavery to help you understand. Previously, you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy…Now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord*." Verse 23 is often used to bring people to faith, but in context, it reminds believers that who we used to be and what we used to do before we met Jesus wasn't bringing life to us or anyone around us. It's urging us to see the folly of our old ways so that we desire new ways, which means that Christians should regularly be asking ourselves: "*In what ways has becoming a Christian transformed me over time?*"

Second, the ***song*** in ***verses 9-10*** includes the phrase ***from every tribe and language and people and nation***. While the Old Testament Exodus story was mostly about God rescuing Israel, this updated version in the form of a ***new song*** declares that Christ's death has somehow achieved a bigger and better Exodus ***from*** all 4 corners of the earth (likely why he used of 4 words): ***every tribe*** (lineage, heritage), ***language*** (cultural dialects), ***people*** (self-defined clusters), and ***nation*** (geography, borders). This list is meant to be representative, not exhaustive--to reveal how NO GROUP IS LEFT OUT of God's gracious hospitality. So, here's a good question: "*Is your view of God big enough to include all types of people or only certain types of people?*" Think back to last week's lesson on how the nation of Israel came from Abraham's family and recall what God told Abraham in Genesis 12: "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse him who dishonors you, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*." After the Exodus, God kept pleading with His people to be a light to the whole world, but by the time Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Israel had become known for excluding whoever didn't fit their picture of someone who was redeemable. This segues into…

The third phrase in the ***song*** of ***verses 9-10***: ***you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth***. While there's disagreement over when this ***reign*** started or will start, there's no disputing that God's work in Egypt had a far wider scope and was also a signpost pointing forward to how salvation is more than a personal rescue plan or lifestyle enhancer! Professor NT Wright (pg. 56) put it like this: "*In the first of the three songs in this passage, we find that the lamb is being praised, not just for rescuing us but for turning us from hopeless rebels into useful servants, from sin-slaves into 'a kingdom and priests.' From rubbish into royalty…The lamb has set us free to stop being spectators and to start being actors*." What is this meant to imply? In one sense, it tells us God hasn't given up on His creation, despite how it seems that so many have given up on Him and traded the pursuit of God for the pursuit of any other means of redemption. On that note, I'll close with one other question for you to ponder this week: "*How can it help to realize God is actively finishing what He started in the beginning?*" (cf. Philippians 1:6).

Let's pray: Father, it seems there's a never-ending flow of truth to be learned about your infiniteness, not merely to inform us but also to transform us--not just for after we die but for embracing eternal life now! As I said in the intro, you gave John this vision to remind everyone that, regardless of how hopeless life seems, you deserve to be worshiped above all because the death of your Son (***the Lamb***) changed

everything from that day forward! Your redemption is available to all types of people, even those this world despises and rejects. You rescue people, not merely to chase short-sighted hopes and dreams, but to discover and desire your better, life-giving ways. You also want to partner with us to bring life, like how you desired to collaborate with Adam and Eve before they chose a path that has produced so much death. Your grace, then, should certainly not be viewed as cheap or without purpose. While it's true that grace is opposed to earning, it isn't opposed to effort--those you redeem are expected to trek the tough terrain of transformation so that we can grow into ***a kingdom and priests to our God who share in your reign on earth as in heaven***. May this be the desire of our hearts and the heart of our worship. Amen.

Considerations for discussion leaders:
1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the "sweet spot", spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Preparing for and applying our sermon from Revelation 5:8-10.

During this series it would help to repeatedly read over the chapter we're exploring. It would also be beneficial to utilize a commentary that explains the various interpretive strategies used throughout church history. If you need a suggestion, please ask! We should also be thinking about our "*next step*" in our relationship with Jesus. The Bible isn't meant simply to "*inform*" but to also "*transform*", and a next step always begins with faith in Christ--either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Our help comes through Christ's Spirit and His church body!

Other application questions (Don't forget the underlined questions in the sermon notes above!):

- How does Jesus (the Messiah/Christ) as the "Lamb of God "reframe" how we understand things like God's identity, nature, and purposes?
- How should the vision in chapters 4 and 5 shape how we read, interpret, and apply the rest of the book?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- A technical article about debating the length of Israel's captivity in Egypt and if it matters.
- 5 Strategies for Reading Revelation from the Bible Project (the first 17 minutes is GOLD!)
- Heaven and Earth Theme from the Bible Project
- Other super helpful Revelation summaries from the Bible Project

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Contents of the scroll**: "This scroll has been variously identified as the Scriptures, the Book of Life (e.g., 20:12), and a legal document, but most often as the eschatological plan of God to judge and save the world—a plan that is, rather literally, about to unfold. This last interpretation makes the most sense in light of parallels from other apocalyptic literature as well as the narrative flow of the book of Revelation, as the seals, beginning in chapter 6, are identified with divine judgment." (Gorman, 108)

- **The role of chapters 4-5**: "This worship scene connects the situation of the churches in Revelation 2–3 and the execution of God's plan beginning in Revelation 6. The Lamb who was slain will soon lead the way in defeating God's enemies once and for all." (Duvall, 94)
- **The aim of chapters 4-5**: "These are the kinds of moments that should give any interpreter reason for pause, since these words hardly need commentary, but rather affirmation and acclamation. Readers of this passage who themselves fail to join in with the heavenly host are listening to the text only cerebrally, and not with the exhilaration intended by John, so that his readers are themselves drawn into the heavenly scene as part of the worship. Indeed, the reader who fails in the present to enter into the heavenly worship, which for them is still to come, will have missed John's purpose by several leagues…John is addressing the readers' imaginations and wants them to see by way of vivid imagery what God will let loose in the future, both theirs and that of those who are harassing and/or tormenting them." (Fee, 83-84)
- **Our worship truly rises to heaven**: "John tells us what the incense is: it's the prayers of God's people, that is, of you and me. The heavenly scene is umbilically related to the earthly. The ordinary, faithful, humble prayers of Christians here on earth appear in heaven as glorious, sweet-smelling incense. I suspect the same is true of the music, with the heavenly harps corresponding to the song, however feeble and out of tune, which we sing to God's praise here and now. Then, in the first of the three songs in this passage, we find that the lamb is being praised, not just for rescuing us but for turning us from hopeless rebels into useful servants, from sin-slaves into 'a kingdom and priests'. From rubbish into royalty. This is our play. The lamb has set us free to stop being spectators and to start being actors." (Wright, 56.)
- **The cross as a new Exodus**: "Most significantly for John, this is a slaughtered lamb, a sacrificed lamb. Plagues will fall on the disobedient world (Rev. 6–16), but just as the blood of the Passover lamb delivered Israel from the climactic plague (Ex. 12:23), so Jesus' blood will protect his people during God's judgments on humanity (Rev. 7:3). Jesus' victory is like a new exodus (5:9–10; 15:3), and Jesus himself is the new Lamb (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7)." (Keener, 187)
- **No one left out**: "The imagery of the Lamb and of 'a kingdom and priests serving our God' (5:10; cf. 1:6; Exod 19:6) is reminiscent of the Passover and Exodus stories, only this time the redeemed people come, not from one nation, but 'from every tribe and language and people and nation' (5:9; cf. 7:9; 21:24; 22:2). (Gorman, 109-110)
- **How Christ's blood ransoms people**: "In the Old Testament, the sacrifice of an animal and the blood shed from it made forgiveness of sin possible. Blood represented the sinner's life, infected by his sin and headed for death. Blood also represented the innocent life of the animal that was sacrificed in place of the guilty person making the offering. The death of the animal (of which the blood was proof) fulfilled the death penalty, and God granted forgiveness to the sinner making the sacrifice. God's forgiveness was based on the faith of the person doing the sacrificing. How does Jesus' blood relate to this? People under the old covenant (those who lived before Jesus) could approach God only through a priest and an animal sacrifice. The old covenant was a picture of the new, pointing forward to the day when Jesus himself would be the final and ultimate sacrifice for sin. Rather than an unblemished lamb slain on the altar, the perfect Lamb of God was slain on the cross. He was a sinless sacrifice, making it possible for people all over the world (every tribe, language, people, and nation) to have all their sins forgiven. Jesus' death satisfied God's penalty for sin (Galatians 3:28). 'Under the system of Jewish laws, the high priest brought the blood of animals into the Holy Place as a sacrifice for sin…. So also Jesus suffered and died outside the city gates in order to make his people holy by shedding his own blood' (Hebrews

13:11–12 NLT).” Bruce B. Barton, Revelation, ed. Grant R. Osborne, Life Application Bible Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2000), 65–66.

- **Christ’s cross radically changed our status**: “Revelation 5:9–10 presents an opportunity to remind people of how important they are to the Lord. Jesus has redeemed people from every tribe and language and people and nation. Consequently, we retain our created uniqueness when we become Christ followers. But we are also united in deep ways as members of one kingdom. We have the present privilege of full and unhindered access to God…Often when people are facing ridicule and rejection from the world, they need to hear that they are God’s prized possession and are extremely important to him. They also need to hear that they have significant work to do as priests to God. Our significance comes from our standing before God rather than the world’s appraisal of us.” (Duvall, 98)

Quotes related to the larger context:

- **Biblical Apocalypses**: “So, in terms of the two books that are given the label apocalyptic, there's one in the Hebrew Bible, one in the New Testament: Daniel and Revelation. With Daniel, it's a bit of a misnomer because half of the book is these dreams and visions. But the first half of the book are the narratives about Daniel and his friends. Those two halves go together in a crucially important way, but the whole book isn't an apocalypse like The Revelation is. It's also true that there are sections of other books that are apocalypses. Like Zechariah, first half of the book is about his dreams and visions in the heavenly temple. Sections of the book of Ezekiel, the beginning, middle, and end. The prophet Isaiah has an apocalypse in one chapter, chapter 6. The Prophet Amos has a series of apocalypses: chapter 7 through 9. And then we talked about Abraham has dreams, visions and so is Jacob. There you go. In a way, what we're focusing in on is when you have a whole book or a section of a book that is full of this kind of dream imagery.” (Tim Macke Video Transcript)
- **Apocalyptic Literature**: “John’s throne vision in Revelation 4, like most of this book, resembles visions in the biblical prophets (esp. Isa. 6:1–5; Ezek. 1:4–28; Dan. 7:9–14). Yet while Revelation is biblical, it is also relevant to the issues and language of its day: John frequently emphasizes the themes most dominant in the literature of his contemporaries, which we call apocalyptic literature. From an early period, Jewish apocalyptic texts focused on and developed particularly the throne visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah. John’s language regularly echoes Scripture, but he shares this feature with some of his contemporaries: ‘And I looked and behold’ (lit. trans. of 4:1) is standard language from Ezekiel (e.g., Ezek. 1:4, 15; 2:9; 8:2, 7, 10; 44:4) and Daniel (Dan. 8:3, 15; 10:5; 12:5), which also becomes characteristic of apocalyptic visions (e.g., 1 Enoch 14:14–15, 18; 85:3). The similarity of subject matter between Revelation and other apocalyptic visions makes some of the differences in detail all the more striking. Apocalyptic texts frequently narrate the visionary’s arduous journey through various heavenly gates to reach God’s throne (e.g., 1 Enoch 14:9–13); some suggest dangers involved in this journey. By contrast, yet like his biblical predecessors, John is simply transported there by God’s sovereign summons (Rev. 4:1) and the Spirit’s inspiration (4:2; cf. 17:3; 21:10). Some texts provide angelic help for the ascent (e.g., 1 Enoch 71:5; 87:3; 2 Enoch 7:1; 2 Bar. 6:3–4), but John ascends simply by the Spirit, as did Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 5, 24; 37:1; 43:5)… John does not have to force his way into heaven, as some of his contemporaries thought they did; he is invited, in language that recalls God’s call to Moses to receive his revelation: ‘Come up here’ (Rev. 4:1; cf. Ex. 19:20, 24; 24:12; 34:2) recalls the Bible’s first throne vision (Ex. 24:10–12; cf. also 19:24).” (Keener, 169-170)

- **Engaging our imaginations**: "Perhaps above everything else, one must be warned not to stoop to unthoughtful literalism while reading chapters 4 and 5. Rather, children of the Enlightenment though we are, we must do our best to let the visions speak to our imaginations—to take our breath away, as it were, and thus to give one theological perspective from which to see what comes next in chapter 6, not to mention our own present existence." (Fee, 66)
- **How chapter 3 flows into 4**: "The picture of Christ in 3:21 presently sitting on His Father's throne leads into the vision of chs. 4–5. In these chapters John wants to explain in more detail and with more imagery the past act of Christ's exaltation upon His throne as ruler over the church and the cosmos, which was accomplished by His death and resurrection. John is taken up to the throne room of God, where he sees Christ enthroned along with the Father. The vision shows how Christ's exhortation to each of the churches to overcome is based on the fact that Christ Himself has already overcome (5:5)…*I will show you what must come to pass* after these things is apparently used in the same way as in 1:1 and 1:19. We have already seen that the after these things allusion from Daniel in 1:19 and its equivalent 'shortly/quickly' in 1:1 indicated that the fulfillment of the Daniel 2 prophecy concerning the establishment of God's kingdom has begun in Christ and the church. Rev. 4:1 introduces not only 4:1–5:14, but also the rest of the visions in the book (4:2–22:5). It becomes clear, therefore, that all the visions about to unfold concern events throughout the church age, past, present, and future. Some may have already unfolded, others await their fulfillment, and yet others have multiple fulfillments throughout the church age. In this connection, the NT is both consistent and clear in its view that the 'last days' or 'latter days' started already with the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:17–21, citing Joel 2:28–32 as fulfilled; 1 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 1:20; Heb. 1:2; Jas. 5:3; 1 John 2:18; Jude 18, etc.)…All the visions from Rev. 6:1 to 22:5 flow out of the vision in chs. 4 and 5. They are all visions which come from the sealed book of 5:1ff. This means that all these visions probably have a mixture of past, present, and future elements." (Beale, 96, 99-100)
- **How the chapters fit together**: "It may help us to keep our balance in the rich mixture of imagery in the following chapters if we see the book like this, structured around its sequences of 'sevens'. We have already had the seven letters to the churches. Now we are to be introduced to the seven seals, which are opened between 6:1 and 8:1. The seventh introduces a further sequence, the seven trumpets, which are blown one by one from 8:6 to 11:15. Then, at the centre of the book, we find visions which unveil the ultimate source of evil and its chief agents: the Dragon, the Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Land—and also a vision of those who have somehow defeated these monsters (chapters 12–15). This then leads into the final sequence of seven: the seven bowls of God's wrath, the final plagues which, like the plagues of Egypt (15:1), will be the means of judging the great tyrannical power and rescuing God's people from its claws. These bowls of wrath are poured out in chapter 16, but their effect is described more fully in chapters 17 and 18, leading to the celebration of victory over the two Beasts in chapter 19. That only leaves the old Dragon himself, and the last twists of his fate are described in chapter 20. This then clears the stage for the final unveiling of God's eventual plan: the New Jerusalem in which heaven and earth are joined fully and forever." (Wright, 43-44)
- **Behind the scenes**: "Now, by strong implication, we are being invited to see that the powers of the world are simply parodies, cheap imitation copies, of the one Power who really and truly rules in heaven and on earth. As John's great vision unfolds, we will see how it is that these human kingdoms have acquired their wicked, cruel power, and how it is that God's radically different sort of power will win the victory over them. This is the victory in which the seven letters were urging the churches to claim their share. We now discover how that victory comes about. It begins

with the unveiling of reality. Behind the complex and messy confusions of church life in ancient Turkey; behind the challenges of the fake synagogues and the threatening rulers; behind the ambiguous struggles and difficulties of ordinary Christians—there stands the heavenly throne room in which the world's creator and lord remains sovereign. Only by stopping in our tracks and contemplating this vision can we begin to glimpse the reality which not only makes sense of our own realities but enables us, too, to win the victory." (Wright, 45-46)

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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