

Revelation 5:1-4

Revelation 5 is a climactic turning point in the flow of the Apocalypse. Following the breathtaking vision of God on His throne in chapter 4, the apostle John now witnesses a dramatic scene that centers on a sealed scroll—a mysterious yet pivotal object in God’s redemptive and eschatological plan. The chapter shifts focus from the throne of divine majesty to the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the scroll, initiating the judgments that follow in chapter 6 and beyond.

Revelation 5 is the second part of a **heavenly throne room vision** (Rev. 4–5) that sets the stage for the judgments of the Tribulation (Rev. 6–19). While chapter 4 emphasizes the holiness and sovereignty of God the Father as noted in the previous study, chapter 5 emphasizes the worthiness and redemptive authority of the Son, the Lamb of God, as it shall be seen.

This vision occurs *after* the Church Age (chapters 2–3) and *before* the opening of the seals in chapter 6. Therefore, from a Pre-Tribulational perspective, the Church is already seen in heaven (cf. Rev. 4:4, the 24 elders representing redeemed saints), and what unfolds from chapter 6 onward pertains to God’s program for Israel and the nations during the 70th week of Daniel (Dan. 9:27), also known as the Tribulation period.

There are four new scenes that are introduced in this chapter by Καὶ εἶδον (kai eidon, ‘And I saw’).¹

Scene 1: The Sealed Scroll in God’s Right Hand (Revelation 5:1 – “*And I saw...*”).

Scene 2: The Angel’s Challenge and the Elder’s Comfort (Revelation 5:2–5, “² *Then I saw ...*”).

Scene 3: The Slain Lamb Who Stands (Revelation 5:6–10, “⁶ *And I looked, and behold...*”).

Scene 4: Universal Worship of the Lamb (Revelation 5:11–14, “¹¹ *Then I looked...*”).

“And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals” (Revelation 5:1).

In this first scene John says that he “... *saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll...*” Thus, the question becomes, Who is the “*He*” that John saw?

¹ Thomas, p. 374.

It is observable that the One that John sees, the One on the throne, is clearly God the Father (cf. Rev. 4:2–3), whose throne is the center of heaven. He is the One that John referred to in Revelation 4:2-3 where he said,

“² Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. ³ And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald.”

It is not the Holy Spirit and it is not the Son because they are spoken of as being distinct in verses 6-7,

“⁶ And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.”

John sees that the scroll was “*in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.*”

Why is this important that the scroll was in the right hand, and not left, of Him who sat on the throne, you might ask? This is important because “*right hand*” symbolizes a place of a place of honour or authority.²

τὴν δεξιὰν (ho dexios) in Greek, the right hand is spoken of Christ being at God’s right hand in Acts 2:3-34; 5:31; 7:55-56. And because Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, thus it is seen that the Father has the scroll in His right hand, from where the Son will come and take it (v. 7). If Jesus was on the Father’s left hand, then He would not have the authority of the Father.

John also mentioned the scroll being in the Father’s right hand because with this he is emphasizing that what is about to be revealed comes directly from the authority of God Himself. This is not merely a vision—it is a divine decree. Let’s pay attention to the scroll that John sees.

The Greek word for “*scroll*” is βιβλίον, which refers to “a document consisting of a scroll or book — ‘scroll, roll, book.’”³ And “A biblion (‘scroll’) was made by processing either papyrus or skins from different kinds of animals”.⁴

The Greek word *biblion*⁵ is often used for a scroll, not a codex (modern-style book).⁶

² Thayer’s.

³ Johannes P. Louw & Eugene A. Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, Copyright 1988, 1989, Second Edition.

⁴ Thomas, p. 375.

John notices that the scroll is written within and on the backside (inside and outside), which was unusual for typical scrolls—suggesting it is completely filled, indicating the completeness and thoroughness of its content.

Because this scroll is in the right hand of Him who sits on the throne, this scroll cannot be altered or added to—its message is final and sovereign.

The scroll is “*sealed with seven seals*”. This recalls **Roman legal practice** in which wills or legal documents were sealed with up to seven seals by witnesses.⁷ Only the proper heir or authorized individual could open it.⁸

The scroll is sealed with seven seals, but the way they are placed must allow for sequential opening—each seal opened in order, with the scroll gradually unrolling. Therefore, the seals must be external, not embedded deep within the scroll’s interior. The idea is progressive access, not all-or-nothing access.

According to the Expositor’s Bible Commentary, “Scrolls... were sealed with wax blobs impressed with a signet ring to protect the contents or guarantee the integrity of the

⁵ Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey From Text To Translations, The Origin and Development of the Bible*, p. 30, “The most common English term used to refer to Scripture is the word Bible. It derives from the Latin translation of the Greek word *biblion* (‘book’), itself a derivation of the word *byblos*. One of the names of papyrus. Papyrus. Produced from a reed plant that grew along the banks and marshes of the Nile River in ancient Egypt, was used as a writing material... Multiple sheets of papyrus spliced together to form rolls (scrolls) were wound around wooden dowels called navels. A reader used one hand to unroll the text on one navel and the other hand to roll it up on another. This type of scroll was called *biblos* in Greek, and thus during New Testament times the word *biblion* simply referred to a roll or book. Once a scroll reached a certain size. However, it became awkward to use, as was the case with several of the larger biblical books. For example, the Isaiah Scroll found at Qumram (1QIsa^a) measured approximately twenty-three feet, about the limit for a scroll. Thus, a new format was necessary to conveniently handle a book as large as the Old or New Testament)”.

⁶ Ibid., Thomas also adds, “A few have proposed that this was a book, consisting of separate leaves fastened together in a codex like a modern book. This is based on the assumption that only a flat book could rest on an open hand (Moffatt) and on the use of ἀνοίξει (anoixai, ‘to open’) later in the chapter (Charles; Beckwith). A scroll is unrolled, but a book is opened, is the reasoning. The possibility of a scroll’s resting on an open hand has already been shown, however. The question of the use of anoixai for unrolling a scroll is answered simply by referring to Isa. 37:14, LXX, where the verb is used in such a situation. In the Apocalypse. This verb is particularly fitting because of the seals that must be broken or opened to divulge the scroll’s contents (cf. 5:9) (Beckwith). Two reasons are particularly persuasive in concluding that *biblion* here is in a roll-form. One is the appropriateness of the adverbial expression εσθεν και οπισθεν (‘inside and on the back’) to a scroll as opposed to a book. ‘Inside’ means inside the scroll before unrolling. And ‘on the back’ refers to the back side of the scroll after it is unrolled. The other reason is that papyrus codices did not originate until the second century A.D. or perhaps the late first century at the earliest. John’s work under the primitive conditions of Patmos could therefore hardly have been in a book format. It must have been in the form of a scroll, such as is found in Ezek. 2:9 and 3:1”, p. 375-376.

⁷ Paige Patterson, *The New American Commentary, Revelation 2:1-2* says, “In Roman law, according to some evidence, a testament was sealed with seven seals by seven witnesses before its legality could be established.”

⁸ Mounce, p. 129.

writings. Only the owners could open the seals and disclose the contents. Original documents were sealed, copies were not. Sealed documents were kept hidden while unsealed copies were made public.”⁹

Each seal must be broken in order, allowing the scroll to unroll a bit more. This would mean that only part of the scroll becomes visible with each seal broken, matching the structure of Revelation 6–8.

In this model, the entire scroll remains unreadable until the final (seventh) seal is broken, but the unrolling process begins with the first.

This fits with the dramatic buildup in Revelation: each judgment intensifies, and the full content is only seen at the end. This allows Christ to open it progressively, matching the structure of Revelation.

John notices that the scroll had writings on the “*inside and on the back*”. Thus, the questions must be asked, what is the scroll, or what does this scroll represent, and what is written in it?

The scroll sealed with seven seals (Rev. 5:1) has deep theological significance. In keeping with ancient Jewish and Roman customs, a sealed scroll often represented a legal document, such as a title deed, last will, or legal judgment. In this context, many scholars interpret the scroll as the **title deed to the earth**—symbolizing Christ's rightful inheritance (cf. Ps. 2:8; Dan. 7:13–14) and His authority to reclaim what was lost due to the Fall (cf. Rom. 8:19–22). But there are various views as to what the scroll is. As explained by Robert Thomas:

First view is that this scroll represents the book of the New Covenant because the promised kingdom to be instituted in Rev. 20:1 ff is fulfillment of that covenant. The second view is that the scroll is a testament or will assuring that the inheritance is reserved by God for the saints. A third view is that the scroll represents the Lamb's book of life so prominent elsewhere in Revelation (cf. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). A fourth view is that it represents God's redemptive plan foreshadowed in the OT and complete in the NT. A fifth view is that the scroll is the title-deed or contract-deed to the earth as mentioned earlier. And may I add, this is one of the most accepted views by some commentators and pastors. The sixth and most correct view, I believe, is that the scroll “contains the counsels of God as revealed in the visions beginning at chapter 6. Viewed from God's perspective, these are the judgments that will fall upon the earth during a relatively brief period, eventually at their conclusion issuing in the coming of the promised Messiah and His Kingdom.”¹⁰ In other words, the plausible writings that the scroll contains could be the judgments that unfold from chapter 6-19, which include the Seal judgments, the Trumpet judgments, and the bowl judgments.

⁹ J. Allen, p. 175.

¹⁰ Thomas, p. 376-379. Further argument for these view are given by Thomas (see for further information).

Even though this might be plausible, “an actual reading from the scrolls is nowhere recorded in the Apocalypse (Alford; Lee)...”¹¹ But that background to this plausibility could be taken from the book of Ezekiel. Notice:

*“And He said to me, ‘Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you.’
2 Then the Spirit entered me when He spoke to me, and set me on my feet; and I heard Him who spoke to me. 3 And He said to me: ‘Son of man, I am sending you to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. 4 For they are impudent and stubborn children. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’ 5 As for them, whether they hear or whether they refuse—for they are a rebellious house—yet they will know that a prophet has been among them. 6 ‘And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them nor be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns are with you and you dwell among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words or dismayed by their looks, though they are a rebellious house. 7 You shall speak My words to them, whether they hear or whether they refuse, for they are rebellious. 8 But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you.’ 9 Now when I looked, there was a hand stretched out to me; and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. 10 Then He spread it before me; and there was writing on the inside and on the outside, and written on it were lamentations and mourning and woe” (Eze. 2:1-10).*

Similarities Between the Scrolls (Rev. 5:1 and Ezek. 2:1-10)

Both Scrolls Are Written on Front and Back: This unusual feature (scrolls typically had writing only on one side) emphasizes the fullness or completeness of the content. In both cases, the contents are comprehensive, deliberate, and unchangeable.

The writing on both sides underscores that nothing can be added—the decrees are fixed and final. And both Are Presented by a Divine Being in a Vision

Ezekiel receives the scroll from a divine hand, while John sees the scroll in the right hand of God the Father, even though the Father is not identified in Revelation 5:1 as being the One sitting on the throne. But no other assumption can be made since the Son and the Spirit are identified in Revelation 4 and 5, emphasizing divine origin and authority.

Both Scrolls Relate to Judgment

In Ezekiel, the scroll’s contents are “*lamentations, mourning, and woe*,” a prophetic announcement of judgment upon rebellious Israel. In Revelation, the scroll’s opening initiates progressive judgments during the future Tribulation period (chaps. 6–19), culminating in the reclaiming of the earth by Christ. Notice further similarities in the chart below:

¹¹ Ibid., p. 379.

Comparative Chart: Ezekiel's Scroll vs. John's Scroll		
Category	Ezekiel's Scroll (Ezek. 2:1–10)	John's Scroll (Rev. 5:1)
Biblical Reference	Ezekiel 2:1–10; 3:1–3	Revelation 5:1; 6:1–17
Setting	Babylonian Exile – 6th century BC	Heavenly throne room before the Tribulation
Recipient	Ezekiel, the prophet	The Lamb (Jesus Christ), the only One worthy
Location of the Scroll	Hand extended to Ezekiel in a vision	Right hand of God the Father on the throne
Scroll Appearance	Written on front and back	Written on front and back
Symbolism of Full Writing	Complete, total message of lamentation	Complete, final decrees of divine judgment and redemption
Content of the Scroll	"Lamentations, mourning, and woe" (Ezek. 2:10)	God's sealed judgments (Rev. 6-19).
Method of Use	Ezekiel eats the scroll, internalizing the message before prophesying (Ezek. 3:1–3)	Christ breaks the seven seals to initiate end-time events (Rev. 6–8)
Nature of Judgment	Specific warning to rebellious Israel	Universal judgment during the future Tribulation (Daniel's 70th Week)
Function of the Scroll	A prophetic commission – Ezekiel speaks God's Word	Legal and prophetic enactment – Christ reclaims dominion and executes God's plan
Role of the Main Figure	Prophet commissioned to preach judgment	Christ executes judgment and reclaims the earth
Covenantal Context	Under the Mosaic Covenant; judgment for covenant violation	After the Church Age; judgment leading to Israel's restoration and Christ's Kingdom
Eschatological Implication	Judgment precedes restoration of Israel (foreshadowed in later chapters)	Judgment precedes Second Coming and Millennial Kingdom (Rev. 19–20)
Theological Significance	Foretelling of divine wrath upon apostate Israel	Fulfillment of God's redemptive plan and eviction of Satan from the earth
Dispensational Insight	Prophetic message during Israel's captivity under the Old Covenant	Fulfillment of prophecy during Daniel's 70th week, resuming God's program with Israel
Outcome	Ezekiel becomes a watchman to rebellious Israel (Ezek. 3:17)	Christ breaks each seal, unleashing the progressive judgments of the Tribulation (Rev. 6–18), leading to His Second Coming and Kingdom (Rev. 19–20)

Dispensational and Premillennial Significance of John's scroll

The scroll contains the judgments of the Tribulation period, as each seal unleashes part of God's wrath (chapters 6–8).¹²

This moment occurs after the Church is raptured (cf. Rev. 4:1), which aligns with the Pre-Tribulational view: the Church is not destined for wrath (1 Thess. 5:9).

The opening of this scroll initiates the 70th Week of Daniel (Dan. 9:27), the final seven-year Tribulation focused on **Israel**, not the Church.

¹² This scroll is not titled, and scholars have debated long about exactly what this scroll represents. Ultimately, there can be little question. This is God's Judgment Scroll, his plan long ago made to condemn wickedness and reward righteousness. If God is the one who made the plan, then God's Son is the only one worthy to enact the plan.

The fact that no one is initially found worthy to open it (v.2–4) points to the fallen nature of man and the necessity for a Redeemer-King, who will be revealed in verse 5: the Lion of the Tribe of Judah—Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, this scroll leads to the Second Coming of Christ (Rev. 19), the destruction of the Antichrist, the salvation of Israel, and the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom (Rev. 20:1–6).

And, apart from these events being literal, once the opening of the first seal begins, there is no stopping it because this begins the progressive judgments in the book of Revelation that will literally occur during the last seven years of world history.

“² Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?” ³ And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it” (Rev. 5:2–3).

The seven seals indicate a complete and legally secure document. Only someone with the rightful authority can open it. The drama of Revelation 5 revolves around the question: *“Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?”* (Rev. 5:2).

The *“strong angel”* mentioned in Revelation 5:2 has prompted speculation among interpreters regarding his identity—most notably whether he might be Michael or Gabriel. While this is possible, it is not explicitly stated in the text.

They so speculate because Michael the archangel, is associated in Scripture with warfare and protection of Israel (cf. *Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Rev. 12:7*), and Gabriel is known as a messenger of divine revelation (*Dan. 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26*).

Either could fit the role of a herald with a *“loud voice”* proclaiming a message of such cosmic significance. However, John does not name the angel.

Since Revelation often distinguishes named angels (like Michael in Rev. 12:7), the absence of a name here suggests this *“strong angel”* is likely a mighty but unnamed angelic being, serving under God's authority—not necessarily Michael or Gabriel. Thus, while the possibility exists, the silence of the text cautions against dogmatism, as I often emphasize.

“A loud voice (or loud voices) is rather a common in the Apocalypse (cf. 1:10; 5:12; 6:10; 7:2, 10; 8:13; 10:3; 11:12, 15; 12:10; 14:7, 9, 15, 18; 16:1, 17; 19:1, 17; 21:3). And the loud voice proclaimed,

“... *“Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?”*³ *And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it*”
(Rev. 5:2b-3).

As stated by the New American Commentary, “Apparently, John retains his position as spectator while a considerable search ensues. But the results of the search are negative. There is no one found in heaven, no one from the earth, and no one from under the earth worthy to open the scroll or look inside it. The reference to no one under the earth is probably a reference to Hades or to the realm of the dead. It is tantamount to saying that no one in the heavenly entourage—God himself obviously excluded—and no one among the living or among the dead was found to open it.”¹³

The Greek word for “*worthy*” is ἀξιος (axios), which means, “pertaining to having a relatively high degree of comparable merit or worth — ‘worthy, comparable, of comparable value, worthily.’”¹⁴

Why No One Was Worthy

Universal Unworthiness: The phrase “no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth” emphasizes the universal scope of unworthiness. This includes: Angels (in heaven); Humanity (on the earth); The dead (under the earth). This echoes Romans 3:10, 23 which says,

“There is none righteous, no, not one.” All creation is disqualified due to sin, fallenness, or creatureliness.

Moral and Legal Worthiness

To open the scroll isn’t merely a matter of strength or curiosity—it requires legal authority and moral perfection.

The scroll represents God’s plan to redeem and judge the world—only One who is both Redeemer and King could lawfully execute it.

Thus, No one in heaven or earth was worthy to open the scroll because no created being—angelic or human—possessed the redemptive authority, sinless perfection, or legal right to reclaim dominion over the earth and execute God's judgment. As Robert Thomas explains, “Oudeis edynato (‘no one was able’) describes the unaltered and complete impotence of created beings to perform this function. The possibility is

¹³ Paige Patterson, New American Commentary, Revelation 5:3.

¹⁴ Louw & Nida.

reduced to a vanishing point after a sear produces no one in region after region (Morris)."¹⁵

“3 And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it” (Rev. 5:3b).

If no one was worthy even to “*look at*” the scroll (Rev. 5:3), then how is John able to witness it in the vision? Isn’t he seeing the scroll when others were not even allowed to look at it?

John is not looking at the **contents** of the scroll, nor is he trying to take or open it. He is a divinely appointed prophetic observer. The prohibition in Revelation 5:3 is not about mere visibility in a vision—it’s about worthiness to access, open, and legally or morally examine the scroll’s inner contents and initiate its fulfillment.

John is not part of the search for one worthy to open the scroll. He is not being considered. He is present in heaven as a witness—a prophet receiving revelation (cf. Rev. 1:1–2). His seeing is permitted and guided by God for the purpose of relaying what he sees to the churches (Rev. 1:11, Rev. 4:1). He sees the scroll from a distance, but not its contents.

“4 So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it” (Rev. 5:4).

In Greek: Καὶ ἐγὼ ἔκλαιον πολὺ, meaning, “And I was weeping greatly”. The NLT renders it, “4 Then I began to weep bitterly...”. The NIV renders it, “4 I wept and wept...”. And the ESV renders it, “4 and I began to weep loudly...” In other words, John was *continuously sobbing or lamenting intensely*. This is not a quiet weep but a loud, mournful, emotional cry, suggesting despair.

John’s intense weeping reflects his deep grief at the apparent failure to find a Redeemer—someone worthy to execute God’s plan as written in Revelation and establish His kingdom.

Let’s break this down: The scroll contains the sequence of events (seals, trumpets, bowls) that lead to the restoration of creation, the defeat of evil, and the establishment of Christ’s kingdom (Rev. 11:15). John sees that no angel, no human, and no created being can open the scroll or even look at it.

¹⁵ Thomas, p. 384.

Without a worthy One to open it, the redemptive plan stalls. Evil remains unjudged. Creation stays under the curse. Satan remains the usurper (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; Rom. 8:19–22).

John Grieves the Delay of God's Kingdom

As a godly man and apostle, John longs for Christ's reign—the fulfillment of Israel's promises, the vindication of the righteous, and the defeat of sin and death.

The thought that there might be no resolution to the world's fallen state moves him to “weep much” (Greek: *eklaion pollý* – “I kept weeping loudly”).

Revelation 5:4 presents a moment of cosmic crisis: the rightful execution of God's judgment and restoration plan is delayed because no created being is worthy. John's weeping is an expression of the deep groaning of creation (cf. Romans 8:22–23), awaiting the revelation of the One who alone can redeem, judge, and reign—the Lamb of God, who appears in verse 5.

“5 But one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals” (Rev. 5:5).