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Revelation #14

**“Weep No More!”
Revelation 5:1-14**

To be perfectly honest, there are times when I feel the same way John did as he stood before the throne of God. Not that I’ve ever been in the presence of the throne of God, but reading Revelation 5:3-4 resonates with my own fears and anxieties about where human history is going and whether or not we are ever going to emerge from this colossal mess we’ve created for ourselves.

I don’t need to elaborate on how bad things are. You know it just as painfully as I do. It was bad in John’s day in the late first century. John was himself the last living apostle, exiled to the island of Patmos. Five of the seven churches to which Jesus had written letters were struggling. John is keenly aware of the pressure and persecution that has already come upon the people of God. You may recall that back in Revelation 1 he identified himself in v. 9 as “your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.”

I’m not in the least surprised that he reacts the way he does now in Revelation 5. He sees “in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals” (v. 1). This “scroll” in all likelihood has written within it the content of *God’s purpose in human history*. In other words, *the scroll contains the content, course, and consummation of history*. In it is written how things will end for both Christians and non-Christians. In other words, this scroll will tell John, and us, who wins, and how. The fact that “no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into it” (v. 3) understandably stirs John’s fears and stokes his anxiety.

Scholars disagree on whether the book was a rolled-up scroll or a codex (the forerunner of the modern book form). Those who believe it was a scroll contend that its contents cannot be revealed until all seven seals are broken. However, others have pointed out that there is evidence that seals on a legal document would have written upon them a brief summary of the contents of the scroll. Thus with the breaking of each seal an element of the more complete contents of the scroll would be revealed. If that is the case, the book’s contents would consist of what transpires immediately in chapter 6 and the remainder of Revelation.

It’s quite amazing, is it not, that none of the four living creatures could break the seals on the scroll and discover its content? Nor could any of the twenty-four elders or any among the millions and millions of angels surrounding the throne. “No one,” says John, literally no one “was found worthy” or qualified or powerful enough “to open the scroll or to look into it” (v. 4).

You'll notice that in v. 2 a "**mighty angel**" is the one who proclaimed that no one in heaven or on earth was able to open the scroll or reveal its contents. This wasn't an ordinary angel, but a "mighty" or "strong" angel. Furthermore, this angel had never sinned. This angel refused to join Satan in his rebellion against God. Yet not even a strong and sinless angel could open the book.

And so all creation in heaven and earth stands motionless and speechless as a search is undertaken for someone worthy to open this book. ***Is no one capable of bringing history to its ordained end?*** Call your Congressman! Call your Senator! Write letters of inquiry to the most brilliant of scientists and astrophysicists! If necessary, get in touch with the White House! Surely someone here on earth is worthy enough and strong enough to open the book of human history and tell us its contents and its consummation.

No. John's disappointment evokes a flood of tears as he contemplates the painful postponement of God's redemptive purposes. Is there ***no one*** who can take authority over history and insure that God's enemies will be judged and his people vindicated?

Yes, there is. "Stop crying, John," says one of the Elders. "Weep no more! There is one who is worthy." But when this person appears, symbolically in the form of an animal, it isn't what John expected. After first seeing a ***lion*** (in v. 5), he is amazed to see a ***lamb*** (in v. 6)! And what is even more amazing is that ***the Lion and the Lamb are the same person!*** The fact that it is a "lamb" points to his atoning sacrifice (Isa. 53:7; perhaps also the Passover Lamb is in view). Yet this lamb is "***standing, as though it had been slain,***" or more literally, "***slaughtered***", with its throat cut.

So what is it that makes Jesus, the Lion of Judah, worthy to do what a strong and sinless angel couldn't do? Well, for one thing, the Lion of the tribe of Judah created this angel, together with all the other myriads of angelic beings. But that isn't the primary reason he alone is worthy to open the book. He is worthy because he has "conquered" (v. 5b). But how did he conquer, and what did he conquer? Merely dying wouldn't make him worthy. The two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus also died but they are hardly worthy. ***How then is death a victory?***

The death of Jesus qualifies him to break the seals and reveal the content of the scroll because, as v. 9 makes explicitly clear, by means of his "blood" alone, people from every tribe and language and people and nation were "ransomed" or redeemed or delivered from sin and condemnation. He "conquered" because his death was not the end but was followed by resurrection. And he has made those whom he ransomed into "a kingdom and priests" to God who will "reign on the earth" (v. 10).

The word "between" or "in the midst of" (v. 6) could suggest that the Lamb is actually on the throne, surrounded by the four creatures and the twenty-four elders. But it is more likely that the Lamb is standing near the throne, for in v. 7 he is portrayed as coming up to the throne and taking the book from the one who sits upon it. Thus again we see the consistent NT portrait of the Son at the right hand of his Father's throne.

The phrase “the slaughtered Lamb” is also found in 5:12 and 13:8. Here the fact that the word “slain” or “slaughtered” is introduced with the comparative particle “as though” or “like” does not mean that the Lamb only *appeared* to have been slaughtered but rather that the Lamb had been slaughtered and was now alive, thus combining the two theological motifs of death and resurrection.

But if it is slain, how does it stand? Clearly, having once been slain the Lamb has now been raised. Here we see again the glorious truth of **resurrection!** The Lamb isn’t slumped over in a lifeless heap or limping along as if on its last legs. ***The Lamb stands as a sign of its resurrected life!*** This is John’s forthright way of saying in no uncertain terms: ***Jesus Christ is alive!***

Up until the time that Jesus Christ returns to this earth in the Second Coming, victory is achieved not by the sword but by a sacrifice. Jesus conquers through the cross! The power to change lives and orchestrate history flows from the love of a crucified carpenter who then literally and physically rose from the dead! Our King, Jesus Christ, does not win converts by killing his enemies, but by dying for them! And then rising again to eternal life. Make no mistake. When he returns it will be to destroy his enemies. At that time mercy will give way to judgment.

Here we see not just the key that unlocks the mystery of why the universe exists. We see the mystery itself. It is Jesus. He is why there is something rather than nothing. God created the universe not only through Jesus but **for** Jesus. By saying the universe exists for Jesus I mean that everything that exists was brought into being to admire and adore and enjoy and celebrate and relish the beauty and splendor of the Lamb of God in his victory over sin, death, and the devil! And in that admiration and celebration we find our most satisfying joy and delight.

Prayers and Praise

At the sound of such gloriously great news, there is only one appropriate response: **singing!** But before we note the singing don’t miss the reference to **praying**. The **“prayers of the saints”** (v. 8b) are more than simple requests or petitions for personal blessing. They are more than likely impassioned pleas of men and women on earth, in the church, for God to reveal his glory and his justice in bringing righteous retribution on his enemies and in vindicating truth and goodness (see 6:9-11; 8:3-4).

The term translated “bowl” or “vial” occurs twelve times in Revelation (5:8; 15:7; 16:1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1; 21:9). The meaning of “bowl” in 5:8, however, appears to be slightly different from the meaning in the other eleven references. Here the “bowls” are filled with incense and are used in a positive, beneficial way, while in the other references they are said to contain the wrath of God and are used to inflict punishments on the earth and its inhabitants.

The four living creatures and the 24 Elders sing a “*new song*” (cf. Ps. 98:1-3; Isa. 42:10-13) because the Lamb has defeated the powers of evil and has inaugurated a new creation. *And why is the lamb worthy of praise? Because he has died, and by dying has redeemed men and women from every corner of the earth, and by redeeming them has made them (i.e., you and me!) into a kingdom and into priests.*

The best manuscript evidence for v. 10 leads to the translation: “And you have made *them* a kingdom and priests . . .” rather than “made *us*.” If the latter were correct, it would lend support to the idea that the elders are human, but the far better attested “them” would seem to differentiate the elders from “those” who are redeemed by the Lamb and made a kingdom of priests.

There is also the question of the verb tense of “reign” in v. 10. Both the future (“they *shall* reign on the earth”) and the present tense (“they *are*” or “*do* reign on the earth”) are supported by substantial manuscript evidence. According to Revelation 1:5-6 we are *already* a kingdom and priests to God, as is also the case here in 5:10. This would lend support to the idea that the redeemed *currently* reign on the earth. This is an example of the “already / not yet” tension in Scripture. We *already* reign as a kingdom and priests, but *not yet* have we entered into the full dimensions of that reign (which will come only with the creation of the “new earth”).

God’s Love of Ethnic Diversity

God loves ethnic diversity as is clearly evident from the purpose of Christ’s sinless life, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection. God’s aim is to have a redeemed bride for his Son from more than one or two or ten ethnic groups, but from all ethnic groups, from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (v. 9b). *Ethnic diversity is at the very heart and core of God’s saving purposes in Christ.*

And his purpose is that they will live and worship and serve in Christ-centered harmony. All of them are priests, none more so than others. All rule and reign, none more so than others.

White Christians are not one kingdom of priests and black Christians another. Chinese Christians do not constitute their own kingdom of priests while Arab Christians comprise another. We are all, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of physiological differences, one kingdom of priests. You cannot have a functioning, God-glorifying kingdom of priests if they despise one another because of racial differences or live in suspicion of the worth and value of the other based on racial differences.

When you permit feelings in your heart of dislike and suspicion and disdain toward a person of a different skin color, you are blaspheming the majesty of the Creator God. You are denouncing the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. You are despising the shed blood of the cross. You are slandering the power of God in shaping men and women of all ethnicities in his image. You are denigrating and denying the purpose of God in redeeming men and women of all ethnicities and colors and making them a kingdom of priests. Racism is blasphemy.

You cannot worship and glorify the majesty of God or embrace his redemptive purposes in Christ while treating his supreme creation with contempt – whatever color or culture or age that creation might be. Immediately following the outrageous events in Charlottesville last week, Al Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, said this:

“A claim of white superiority is not merely wrong, and not merely deadly. It is a denial of the glory of God in creating humanity—every single human being—in his own image. It is a rejection of God’s glory in creating a humanity of different skin pigmentation. It is a misconstrual of God’s judgment and glory in creating different ethnicities. Most urgently, it is a rejection of the gospel of Christ—the great good news of God’s saving purpose in the atonement accomplished by Christ. A claim of racial superiority denies our common humanity, our common sinfulness, our common salvation through faith in Christ, and God’s purpose to create a common new humanity in Christ. You cannot preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and hold to any notion of racial superiority. It is impossible” (Al Mohler).

We come to praise and worship God as ***kings and priests in his kingdom***. As I asked you two weeks ago: ***“What kind of God makes kings of his enemies?”***

An Avalanche of Praise

Suddenly there is a snowball effect that leads to an avalanche of praise. A holy turbulence engulfs the heavens. As the choir sings of God's majesty the adoration of the lamb moves out in ever-widening circles (see vv. 11-13), almost a ripple effect as if a huge stone had been cast into the center of an otherwise calm lake.

At first, it was the ***four living creatures*** singing their song of praise. They are then joined by the ***twenty-four elders***. In v. 11 ***myriads and myriads and thousands and thousands of angels***

follow suit. And if that were not sufficient, we read in v. 13 that “*every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them*” begin to praise the risen Lamb. The seven-fold shout of worship in v. 12 rings out like the resounding chimes of a huge bell:

**POWER! . . . WEALTH! . . . WISDOM! . . . MIGHT! . . . HONOR! . . . GLORY! . . .
BLESSING!**

Education – Exultation – Exaltation

If we don’t know who God is and how he thinks and what he feels and why he does what he does, we have no grounds for joy, no reason to celebrate, no basis for finding satisfaction in him. That is why our careful and meticulous study of the heavenly vision in Revelation 5 is so crucial to our lives as Christians.

Delight in God cannot occur in an intellectual vacuum. Our joy is the fruit of what we know and believe to be true of God. Emotional heat such as joy, delight, and gladness of heart, apart from intellectual light (i.e., the knowledge of God) is useless. Worse still, it is dangerous, for it inevitably leads to fanaticism and idolatry. The experience of heaven’s inhabitants confirms that our knowledge of God (*education*) is the cause or grounds for our delight in him (*exultation*), which blossoms in the fruit of his praise and honor and glory (*exaltation*).

What this tells us is that *the ultimate goal of theology isn’t knowledge, but worship*. If our learning and knowledge of God do not lead to the joyful praise of God, we have failed. We learn only that we might laud, which is to say that *theology without doxology is idolatry*. The only theology worth studying is a theology that can be sung!

Adoration of the Lion and the Lamb

What is it about Jesus that makes him worthy of your adoration and praise? What is it about Jesus that makes him irresistibly attractive? Why is he alone worthy of your whole-hearted allegiance and love?

Consider once again the portrait of Jesus in symbolic language. In Revelation 5:5 he is called “*the Lion of the tribe of Judah,*” but in Revelation 5:6 is also portrayed as the “*Lamb*” who had been slain, though now standing, because alive. So, which is he? Both! Jesus is both Lion and Lamb. And it is in this glorious juxtaposition of what appear to be two contrasting images that we find the answer to our question. Think about this for a moment:

The Lion in whom we find unimpeachable authority is also the Lamb who embodies humility and meekness in the highest degree.

The Lion who wields power and strength that none can resist is also the Lamb who walked this earth in weakness and suffering, resisting none.

The Lion who rules the world and governs its every move is also the Lamb who was meekly led to slaughter by his enemies.

The Lion who is known for his uncompromising commitment to righteousness is also the Lamb who overflows in love to sinners like you and me.

The Lion whose majestic beauty captivates the human heart is also the Lamb who condescended to take upon himself the likeness of a man and was, in appearance, quite ordinary and unimpressive.

The Lion who commands total obedience from everyone is also the Lamb who in his earthly life submitted himself in obedience to the law of God.

The Lion who is holy and pure beyond our wildest imagination is also the Lamb who is gracious and kind and tender-hearted to all.

The Lion who could silence a raging storm with a single word is also the Lamb who refused to speak or revile against those who nailed him to a cross.

The Lion who is life itself is also the Lamb who willingly dies for his enemies.

The Lion who is exalted high above the heavens, immeasurably beyond all of creation and myriads of angels, before whom the greatest and most powerful kings and commanders on earth are but a speck of dust on the balance, is also the Lamb who stooped low, who condescended to become one of us and suffer the trials and challenges put upon him by weak and sinful men.

The Lion who is in himself infinite holiness and righteousness and purity and power is also the Lamb who welcomes broken sinners into his presence and makes intimate friends of his enemies.

The Lion who in himself needs nothing, being altogether self-sufficient, is also the Lamb who gives and gives and then gives yet again so generously and abundantly.

The Lion who is in himself of such blinding glory and brilliance that adoring angels cover their faces is also the Lamb who humbled himself and identified with his creatures so that they might behold him and enjoy him forever.

The Lion who, as Paul says in Philippians 2, exists from all eternity in perfect equality with the Father and the Spirit, equal in all respects as to his divinity, is also the Lamb who in time and history humbled himself and took on the likeness of sinful men and women.

The Lion who is known for his majesty is also the Lamb who is known for his meekness.

The Lion who drove the robbers and thieves out of the Temple is also the Lamb who only days later allowed those very robbers and thieves to nail him to a cross.

The Lion who commands absolute obedience from his creatures is also the Lamb who in obedience honored every command of his Father.

The Lion who rightly burns with wrath against the rebellious and unbelieving is also the Lamb who in the place of the rebellious and unbelieving endured in his own body and soul that very wrath.

He is at one and the same time a Lion-like-Lamb and a Lamb-like-Lion without any inconsistency or contradiction.

God of Love, God of Wrath

An important point that many would prefer that I skip is that the God who is adored for his beauty and holiness and majesty in Revelation 4-5 is *the same God* who pours forth wrath and destruction and terror through the series of seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments.

It is the four living creatures who worship God in Revelation 4-5 who also call forth the four horsemen of the first four seal judgments in 6:1ff. The seven trumpets are blown by the seven angels who stand before God in heaven (8:2,6). And the designation of God in 4:9-10 as he “who lives forever and ever” is found in 15:7 in connection with the “bowls full of the wrath of God.” As Richard Bauckham observes, “it is the God whose awesome holiness the living creatures sing unceasingly who manifests his glory and power in the final series of judgments” (*Theology*, 41).

Even more explicit is the literary link between the seventh of each series of judgments and the statement in 4:5a. In the latter we read of “flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder” issuing from the throne. This formula is then echoed at the opening of the seventh seal judgment (8:5), the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11:19), and the pouring out of the seventh bowl (16:18-21). In other words, the holiness of God described in Revelation 4-5 is most clearly manifested in the judgments on evil in the seals, trumpets, and bowls.

Is it any wonder, then, that when George Frederick Handel read and reflected on the vision of the Lion-like-Lamb and the Lamb-like-Lion, Jesus Christ, he put to music these glorious words:

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ.
And He shall reign for ever and ever,
King of kings, and Lord of lords,
And He shall reign forever and ever,
King of kings, forever and ever,
And Lord of lords,
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
And He shall reign forever and ever,
King of kings! And Lord of lords!
And He shall reign forever and ever,
King of kings! And Lord of lords!

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Conclusion

We must resist any inclination to disregard John's vision as irrelevant, as if it were but a distant dream, an ethereal far off heavenly phenomenon of which we on earth can only wonder. ***This is not virtual reality. This is no computer-generated facsimile.*** It is far more real than anything this temporal world can offer.

The glory of the Holy Spirit is that he can take each syllable of this inspired portrait and set it ablaze that the fire of its truth and life-changing power might forever burn within our hearts. Thus may we be led to join the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures and the chorus of countless millions of angels, together with the redeemed even now in heaven, in the relishing and enjoyment of our great and glorious God!

Why, you ask? Because this is why you exist! This is the reason there is a "you" and a "me". This is the purpose for which Christ died and rose again, this is the goal of all history that is contained in the scroll, namely, that we might glorify and honor and exalt our great Triune God by finding in him and his love and beauty and grace and power the deepest delight that our hearts could ever hope to experience.