

¹Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. ²And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" ³And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, ⁴and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

“One of the biggest and best known churches in the Midwest has recently advertised their worship services as follows; “See Barnum & Bailey’s bested as the magic of the big top circus comes to the fellowship of excitement! Clowns! Acrobats! Animals! Popcorn!”

“Now I read that and I say to myself, ‘How could such a thing ever happen in the name of worship?’ Many other Christians would read the same things and say, ‘Yeah, but what’s your problem? At the end of the day...isn’t all this folderol of this worship business simply a matter of preferring one style over another?’ No. It is not”

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There is a subtlety here that you need to appreciate. On the one hand, I’m glad to acknowledge that worship that takes place among the tribal Christians in Nigeria will not look exactly like the worship of middle class yuppies in California. On the other hand, the contextualization of Christianity is an altogether different issue than the so-called styles of worship that in the end prove to be direct contradictions to the gospel itself.

You say, ‘What do you mean?’ At its’ very core, the gospel of Jesus Christ is self denying. At its’ very essence...by its’ very nature, the gospel of Jesus Christ shatters every expression of human self-sufficiency. If you do not know this, you cannot be a Christian.

To opt for a style of worship that is built upon human ingenuity, that exalts human talent and that is directed towards human approval is to deny the very gospel that establishes the basis for our worship!”ⁱ

Introduction to Chapter 5

It would be difficult to top Revelation chapter 5 for raw, awesome, real worship when sin has been taken out of the equation. In this chapter, we encounter a seeming crisis because the Scroll which God holds in His right hand, which is absolutely critical to the remainder of the book of Revelation, is so designed that only One is worthy & authorized to open it; and at first, no one is found worthy, even after a literal universal search.

Then, the only One worthy is found, and it is Jesus Christ, thus magnifying His uniqueness and worthiness of all praise. As He takes the scroll, the worship begins again and we are privy to a torrent of praise in heaven by the 4 Living Creatures, the 24 elders, and then a chorus of thundering praise erupts as they are joined by millions upon millions of angels and every creature everywhere singing and shouting praises to both the Father & the Lamb.

This chapter is the prelude to the judgment that rains down on the earth from chapter 6 through to chapter 19 and is crucial to our understanding of both the authoritative source of judgment & the sovereignty behind it. In this chapter, the deity of Christ is magnified as His distinct worth is displayed. Surely the Father was also able to open the scroll (or for that matter, The Holy Spirit) – the very action which begins the end of time as we know it and begins the judgment. Yet, the Father defers that judgment to the One who suffered at the hands of wicked men and whose worth and majesty is trampled under foot even today by billions of people; the One to whom “all authority has been given” (Mt. 28:18) will now exercise that authority in an as yet never experienced onslaught of much deserved vengeance. The glory for what will take place after chapter 5 is a shared glory – between Father & Son – the Lamb, the Lion, the Root of David, signifying forever that **Isaiah 42:8** included Jesus Christ.

I. The Scroll

v. 1

“Then I saw...” – this is emblematic of a change of scene, yet in the context of the doxologies and praise of chapter 4, this is the logical progression as something big is about to happen. What John sees is a Scroll in the “right hand” of the One who sits on the throne – the Father. Since the right hand is the position of power & authority, we are to understand that it is being passed with authority to One who has the authority to take it and open it. It is significant that Satan or some other angel does not make any attempt to usurp this action. To do so would mean instant incineration. God alone has authority over this scroll and its’ contents. It will only be passed to the One for whom it has been decreed that He should pronounce judgment on the inhabitants of earth and the demons.

John describes the scroll itself:

- Written within & without (on the back of it)
- Sealed with 7 seals

It has been argued that the only way John could have seen the 7 seals (which are to be opened in a progressive manner), is if the scroll were sealed on the edges (at the end of the scroll). Otherwise, he would only be able to see one at a time. But he could also simply be recalling as he records the account that he saw 7 seals broken so he knows after the fact that there were 7.

The size of the scroll & its’ colour are not mentioned. A scroll at that time would be made from either papyrus or animal skins. The writing on the inside would be the key

element of the scroll, and could not be accessed apart from breaking the seals and unrolling it to reveal the contents. The writing on the back could be a description of what the scroll contained or was symbolic of the fullness of the contents within.

This scroll is extremely important – that much is made obvious by the ceremony described in a search for One worthy to open it, and the subsequent reaction of John when it seemed that such a One could not be found. So what exactly does this scroll contain that is of such import? Well, first of all, as Revelation progresses and the seals are opened, we are witnesses to the actions and judgments contained in it. It is not read, but is acted upon. But what do these actions represent? There are at least 6 major views as to what this scroll is or what it containsⁱⁱⁱ.

The Book of the New Covenant

The promised kingdom is finally brought to fruition in Rev. 20:1ff and fulfills the new covenant of Jer. 31:13-34 & elsewhere. However, the new covenant in Jer. 31 is one of mercy, and the setting for this scroll is judgment.

A Testament or Will

This is a will that assures the saints' inheritance of what God has promised. Ancient Roman wills had to be sealed 7 times; Rev. 11:15 announces Christ's inheritance and the saints who will reign with Him. This explains the joy of chapter 5, but Revelation nowhere else supports this idea. The only reference to inheritance is Rev. 21:7, but it is merely incidental. Again, the judgments do not deal with inheritance but judgment.

The Lamb's Book of Life

The writing inside and outside could point to an exhaustive list of names, but if this were correct, John's mandate would be a desire to divulge the names of the redeemed, but this purpose is also absent in Revelation. Only tribulation is revealed as the seals are broken and the process of breaking them has no meaning unless we can see the results of that action in the book John has written.

God's Redemptive Plan Foreshadowed in the OT & Completed in the NT

This view fits the OT connections of Revelation and provides for the pre-eminence of Christ's atonement in chapter 5 and is good in that it shows God's plan of redemption foreshadowed in the OT, displays His sovereignty over all the world so that He achieves His purpose for creation. However, the opening of the seals does not relate to the past; & does not account for the relationship of the scroll to the wrath being poured out, so this view is inconsistent with chapters 6-19.

Christ's Title Deed to the World

This sort of contract was well known in those times – writings, seals and all; a description on the outside; details inside; used in Jer. 32¹⁰⁻¹⁴ as a title deed to property; & forfeiture of creation @ Genesis 43 has now been reclaimed by the Lamb's redeeming death. This is a possible explanation, but misses 1 key element – it does not account for the process of breaking the seals in Revelation 6ff.

The Counsels of God as Revealed in the Visions From Chapter 6 On

From God's viewpoint, these judgments that will fall on earth, as He has planned from before the creation, are activated and enacted as each seal is opened and the end result of the entire contents of the scroll is the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom of Jesus Christ, followed by final judgment and the eternal state; a new heaven and a new earth. Even the 7th seal contains 7 trumpet judgments and the 7th trumpet contains the 7 bowl judgments. It concurs with Ezekiel's scroll (lament & woe) and likely Daniel's vision, although Daniel, due to his distance in time from these events, was not allowed to record it. When Christ breaks the seals, it doesn't just disclose the contents, but the contents are put into motion and become reality. This is – I believe – the correct view of what the scroll is.

II. The Search for the One Worthy

vv. 2-3

A point of crisis seems to have been reached here as a search goes out to locate someone who has the necessary credentials to take the scroll and to open it, thus revealing the contents and as we find out, to enact what has been written down in the scroll.

John notices a "strong angel" loudly proclaiming, "*Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?*". Some assume that this strong angel is either Gabriel^{iv}, who often appears as a messenger, or Michael the arch-angel, but God's word does not name this angel. The call is a proclamation, not just a statement – as if a town crier on a universal scale is making an announcement that all need to hear.

④

This loud voice penetrates to the remotest parts of the universe and the proclamation is a question designed to invite anyone who has the credentials and is worthy to take and open the scroll to step up. The call goes out, but the sad truth becomes obvious that there are none worthy to respond. No one dares to presume to even contemplate that they can do so. The One who is worthy waits in the wings (as it were) for dramatic effect as well as to ensure for the reader & hearer that there is no other One worthy to do what He is about to do! Rightly understood, this passage alone should squash any claims that there are other ways to God. Where are these would be messiah's now?

This heavenly proclamation penetrated to:

- Heaven
- Earth
- Under the earth

So no being or creature from any of these realms could respond in the affirmative, including demons, angels, people, animals, the angels held chained in the Abyss. No one.

The Greek translated "was able" in v. 3 is in the imperfect tense, signifying the entire creation's inability & unworthiness to open the scroll was chronic and ongoing^v. Created beings, any sort, any rank, any level of greatness or goodness are all completely unable to open this scroll. A dedicated search of all 3 realms mentioned is fruitless in finding a single being who is competent to perform the task. As a result of this universal inability, it appeared at first that the scroll's contents would remain sealed.

Of course, someone might think, "no harm done, because God is certainly worthy to open it", but God the Father has no intention of opening it. Since it contains the judgment

plans for the end of history and His redemptive plan, and He has given over all authority for judgment to His Son (JN. 5:22; MT. 11:27; 28: 18), then there is only One person who ever has been qualified to take this scroll and to break its' seals!

III. John's Reaction

v. 4

As a result of this fruitless search for a worthy individual to take the scroll and open it, John begins to weep loudly. This is not a whimper or tearful melancholy, but an unrestrained outburst of emotion.

What specifically was he crying about? There are a number of possibilities. Perhaps he wept over the moral incapability of all created beings, but John was already aware of fallen angels and the depravity of man. He may have feared that the hoped for revealing the visions promised by God would now be withheld, but that would almost seem like his tears are as a result of curiosity quashed.

The most likely reason for his emotions is that the scroll would remain unopened and God's purposes would somehow be thwarted. Although it is not mentioned, it is almost a certainty that God had commanded the strong angel to make the proclamation and John's anticipation would assume that One would come forth, but no one did. For John, this meant that there might be an indefinite postponement of God's final scenes of redemptive history.

IV. The Only One Worthy

v. 5

In anticipation of what is now about to occur and perhaps as a result of a closer perspective of what is taking place at the throne, one of the elders chides John – “stop crying” or “weep no more”. There is no symbolism here – just an elder functioning as a mediator to inform John that this is no occasion for tears of sorrow, because what will happen is cause for great rejoicing, at least for the angels and the elect. The results will be far from joyful for those who dwell on the earth apart from Christ. The Elders know who the worthy One is – even if He has not yet stepped up to the throne of God.

“Behold” = “look here” – “the Lion of the Tribe of Judah”, which means no one but the Lord Jesus Christ. This title for Jesus goes all the way back to [Genesis 49:8-10](#). In that passage, Jacob, near death, is extending his blessings to his sons and these blessings become prophecies of what the future holds for each son and their descendants.

In the case of Judah, his descendant will be Messiah – cf. Matt. 1:1-16; Luke 3:33-34 – a king. He will have a scepter, a King's symbol of power and royal office, and Christ will descend from this royal line and will sit on David's throne^{vi} forever.

Judah was not the dominant tribe until David became king. Up until that time, most of the other tribes had a turn at dominance, at least as their leaders took roles in Israel's history that brought honour to that tribe. (ie. Saul – tribe of Benjamin; Moses – tribe of Levi; Joshua – the tribe of Ephraim; Gideon – from the tribe of Manasseh; Samson – of the tribe of Dan; etc.)

In Gen. 49:10 (“tribute” ESV) or “Shiloh” (most other translations) is intended to be a title or name of this One to come. It is “to Him shall be the obedience of the peoples”.

The word is related to peace or “shalom” & could be translated, “the One who brings peace”. This is unquestionably a prophecy of the Messiah, who would be a descendant of Judah – a lion. See also Ezek. 21:25-27.^{vii}

By calling Jesus “the Lion of the tribe of Judah”, this passage in Revelation is clearly providing us with evidence that Jesus is this “Shiloh”, the promised king, the Lion whose time has arrived. Not content to simply connect Jesus to Judah, the elder adds, “the Root of David”; so it is an absolute lock that this One who will take the scroll & open it is He who was promised throughout the OT and who appears in the NT. This particular title arises first in Isa. 11:1,10 & then in Jer. 23:5; 33:15.

Both of these prophetic pictures of Christ as Messiah and King are extremely important from an OT perspective and only converge together here in Rev. 5:5 and no where else. The elder goes on; “He has conquered, so that He can open the scroll and its’ seven seals”.

His conquering is over sin, death and Hades. He has prevailed and though He lay down His life, He took it up again and now lives forevermore – cf. JN 16:33. He has overcome the world, so we have no need to fear persecution. It is God the Father, holding forth this scroll, who has given Jesus the name which is above every name – Lord – (Phil. 2:5-11), so as Lord, He alone has authority over every being in the universe (except for the Father) to take this scroll & to open it. Who else would dare approach this throne for that purpose? He alone is worthy! This is forever verified when the father hands Him the scroll.

Next lesson – Lesson # 17...Rev. 5:6-10...The Lamb

ⁱ Art Azurdia, sermon on Rev. 5:1-7, accessed online at spiritempoweredpreaching.org; at the 4:20 mark

ⁱⁱ This is anthropomorphic language – attributing physical characteristics to God, who is Spirit – so that we can better comprehend what is happening in the throne room of heaven. God does not have literal hands, feet, eyes, ears or even a body that could be defined by us as such.

ⁱⁱⁱ All 6 are described in Robert Thomas; Revelation 1-7; pp. 376-381

^{iv} It is Gabriel who brings a message to Daniel in Dan. 8:16; 9:21 and to Mary in Luke 1:19,26

^v Robert Thomas; p. 384

^{vi} Luke 1:32-33; II Sam. 7:11-13; Ps. 89:4; 132:11; Isa. 9:6-7; 16:15; Acts 2:30; Dan. 2:44-45; 7:14; 7:18,27.

^{vii} Most of this information is from Henry Morris, The Genesis Record; Baker; 1998