

I. Set Up

A. This week we continue through our study of the first few chapters of Revelation. Last week – in chapter four – Mike took a look at the big vision of the book, the one that runs from chapter 4 through chapter 21. And the focus was on worship. This week we look at one of the most dramatic moments in the book. And given that this is a book of dramatic moments, that is saying something.

II. Worship Addition??

A. . . . you were ransomed . . . not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. 1 Peter 1:18–22

III. Intro – there are times when the weak win. Not often. Generally, the stronger opponent – the more talented, the bigger and faster, the smarter, the “stronger” (whatever that looks like in that particular arena, it’s different in a chess match than it is football or a law suit). But generally the stronger side wins. However... not always.

A. Occasionally the weak win. Think of Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*. He is in a famous fist fight against George Kennedy. Kennedy keeps knocking him down. But Luke keeps getting up, and eventually Kennedy walks away.

B. I have a related story from high school tennis. There was a kid who played for one of our local rivals who was all of about 5’4” and weighed about 120 lbs. His name was DK Pierson, and I never beat him. All he did was hit the ball back. He was like a garage door. And he just relied on his opponents to make unforced errors and lose their composure – and beat themselves. Which happened to me all three times I played him.

C. He didn’t actually hit the ball back. It was worse than that. He dinked it. That was the term we used. He didn’t hit baseline shots. He did put any top spin on the ball. He just hit these soft, mid-court high dinks that were just begging to be put away. But he would return the put-aways. And dink it back and I’d hit another hard angle shot, and he’d dink it back, and so I’d... hit the next one long, or wide, or into the net. And over time, start to lose my composure and then lose the match. In so many ways, he was the weaker player, but sometimes the weak win.

D. And then there is the ultimate victory by the weak: it’s caught in these pictures of the lamb that was slain.

1. **1. Here is a famous one. Agnus Dei.** It’s from a 17th century Spanish artist.
2. **2. He is another you have likely seen – The Adoration of the Lamb.** It’s a 15th century work by Hubert and Jan van Eyck.

a) **3. It is part of a much bigger work. Where it stands at the center – as the most important part.**

b) **4. Here is a close up on the lamb.**

3. And there are many, many more of a lamb carrying a flag or a cross. It’s an odd idea: a conquering lamb. But it is a common and ancient one – and it comes from our passage today.

- IV. We've been in Revelation for a couple months now. It's:
- A. The last book in the Bible;
 - B. It's a unique book: it's a letter, a prophecy and an apocalypse all at the same time.
 - C. It's deeply devotional, deeply disturbing and profoundly encouraging at the same time.
 - D. A lot of it is a vision.
 - 1. The book starts with a vision of Jesus in heaven – chapter 1; it then moves into seven letters to seven churches - chapters 2 and 3; and then it pivots – to use that horribly overused “2020” term – into a long vision, that has a few sub visions and flash backs and looks ahead and this is where it all gets a bit confusing.
 - 2. Not ultimately confusing – the big point is easy to see: Jesus wins. In fact, the secondary point is easy to see (it is going to get hard, but Jesus wins).
 - 3. But when we look past the forest at the trees it's a bit confusing.
 - E. Last week we worked our way through Revelation 4, which gave us a view of worship in heaven. And I said, “we all worship. The question is, are we worshipping the right things in the right way.”
 - F. Today we move into Revelation 5 for a surprising twist in the story line. (BTW, after this we will jump to Revelation 19 and then move into Advent).
- V. Revelation 5:1: **Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne** (again, no description here) **a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.** We are not told what the scroll says, which has led to a number of theories.
- A. The fact that it has writing on both sides is unusual and adds to the idea that it is really important.
 - B. If you keep reading you find that the scroll is slowly unrolled across chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9. And that it's not until Chapter 10 that we find it completely unrolled. I'm not sure that makes it perfectly clear, even then.
 - 1. Some see it as a book that answers the great mysteries. And there are more than a few great mysteries to be answered.
 - a) Annie Dillard, asks what she calls "the chief theological question of all time," "What the Sam Hill is going on here anyway?"
 - C. There are all kinds of theories.
 - 1. Some say it is a will. In the Roman world it was customary to have your final will and testament sealed with seven seals. The idea is that this is Christ's will – which would talk about the coming kingdom, the redemption of his followers, the roll out of his plans. But this doesn't fit that well, because when it is opened the focus is on the outpouring of God's wrath in judgment.
 - 2. Some say it's the Book of the Redeemed – the Lamb's Book of Life – but that doesn't seem to line up.
 - 3. A third view is that it's The Old Testament – that can only really be understood in light of Christ.
 - 4. It's not as clear as we might like – but the idea is that it's God's total plan for judgment and redemption..

VI. V2: **And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.**

A. This seems like a scene out of King Arthur, where no one can take the sword out of the stone after Merlin cast the spell on it.

B. John wept and wept. This is really, really bad news. The fact that John, who is an old man who has already suffered a lot (which suggests he is seasoned. He doesn't panic easily). The fact that he is so undone that the term wept is repeated – means he is devastated.

C. But there is no one who can access and act on the plan. It seems that there is a great plan but history is just going to spin out of control.

D. We are all broken. We have all sinned. Stumbled – not in small ways. We underestimate what that means and how devastating it is. We are not suffering from a flesh wound.

VII. V5: **Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”**

A. The “Lion of the tribe of Judah” and “the Root of David” are both Jewish titles linked to prophecies from the Old Testament.

B. The Lion of Judah takes us back to Genesis 49, where Judah – the fourth son, but the one set up to inherit the blessing after the first three disqualify themselves, is called the lion cub.

1. Interestingly, there are lots of quotes from the Old Testament found in this letter – in the 404 verses there are allusions to 518 Old Testament verses¹ - but none are exact. It suggests that John was so familiar with the book that it had become part of his speech.

2. In any event, the reference in Genesis 49 is to a prediction that there would be one from the tribe of Judah who would be qualified, who would rule over the earth and who would solve its problems. That person is Jesus.

C. The Root of David take us to Isaiah 11, and it is interesting in that what is earlier referred to is the shoot of David. A shoot is above and grows out of the plant. A root suggests something that lies underneath and comes first.²

VIII. V6: **Then I saw a Lamb. STOP**

A. This is the big dramatic moment. What he hears is, “Don't worry. Don't cry. John, there is someone who can do this. The lion of Judah.” And so we think – he thinks: big, strong, tough, powerful, majestic, imperial, a fighter. King of the jungle. Top of the food chain.

B. But when he turns to look, what he sees is a lamb – small, soft, young, weak, defenseless.

1. There is a sense in which animals come in four classifications:

a) You've got your predators: big muscles, sharp claws, lots of teeth, everything about them advertises, “I eat you. You do not eat me.”

b) Then you've got the non-predators that are really good at running away. Deer. Gazelles. Rabbits. There is a sense in which they say, "try to catch me."

c) Then you have this third classification – they are not predators and they are not really fast, but they have something going for them. Some reason you leave them alone.

(1) Skunks – it's obvious

(2) Snakes – might bit you.

(3) Elephants, hippos, rhinos – they are too big to be messed with.

(4) And there is a bunch of other animals or insects that can climb a tree or hide in plain site or they taste really bad.

d) And then you have sheep. Taste good. Slow. No defenses. They need someone to keep help keep them a live. They need a shepherd.

C. In so many ways, a baby sheep (a lamb) is the exact opposite of a lion. And this one has already been slaughtered.

IX. Then I saw a lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.

A. This is a huge, shocking, confusing surprise.

B. Now, the fact that what John sees is a lamb is not thunder from a blue sky.

1. After all, we have the Passover. Back in Exodus 12 the Jews were instructed to bring an unblemished male lamb and sacrifice it for their sins. And this event had been done annually for over a thousand years.

2. And John the Baptist had called Jesus the Lamb of God. And "Lamb of God" is the favorite way John the Apostle refers to Jesus. He uses it 28 times in the Book of Revelation.

C. But when someone says, "Look, a lion. And it rescued us!" And you look and see a lamb, well, that's confusing.

D. And we have a right to be confused because several confusing things are going on.

1. We are expecting to see a lion and we see a lamb. We are expecting to see a lion that won by being strong, and we see a lamb that won by dying.

E. How did the lamb win? How does the lamb conquer? In the most unexpected and subversive way possible - by suffering. The lamb won by losing. The lamb conquers by being crucified, marred, despised, rejected, smitten stricken, afflicted wounded, chastened and oppressed.³

F. He won in a way the enemy did not see coming and could not believe after it happened.

G. The lamb won by losing, by dying, by suffering in our place. And because he has done this, all who hide behind the blood of the lamb – me, you, us – are saved.

H. He does win. Don't miss this: the lamb is standing. **Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.** Not sure if you have seen a slaughtered lamb, but they do not stand. But Jesus – the Lamb of God – defeated death.

I. There is so much to see here – this is a passage you have to sit with, because it challenges so much of what we think. We think we win by winning, through power.

1. Well, that is not what Jesus did.

2. I think Lewis does a pretty good job of trying to explain this in the Chronicles - he has a great lion, Aslan, rule in majesty and roar in triumph, but he then has him submit to being put to death by the evil characters controlled by the White Witch. He is submitting himself in place of Peter. I think Lewis hints at the lion and lamb thing.

3. But I think Tolkien does it better. In the Lord of the Ring the offices of Christ – prophet, priest and king) are shared by three people. Gandalf – the wizard – is the prophet, Aragorn is the king. The key to it all is Frodo – the priest -who will carry the ring and get rid of it, though it mortally wounds him. And he is able to do this because he is small. He is a halfling. And the idea that he would sacrifice himself for others is not something Sauron (the evil eye) can even comprehend.

4. No one can. The Romans sure didn't get it. Neither did the Jews. The prophecies about the Messiah in the Old Testament have three themes: king, general and suffering servant. The Jews ignored the third.

J. It is hard for us to unpack all that is going on here. I appreciate those who try to smuggle the truth under our radar. We think you win by winning. Straight up. We want power. And there is something to that. Let me keep reading:

X. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

A. Horns in Scripture speak of power – animals with horns have power. And seven is the number of fullness. So the Lamb has fullness of power on the basis of his death. And Jesus leans into that after his resurrection, "All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me," (Matthew 28:18 KJV).

B. He also has seven eyes – these speak of full intelligence, discernment.

1. These seven eyes are the seven spirits of God which, as we have already seen, is a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

2. In the first chapter of John's Gospel it is said of Jesus that he "does not need that any should tell him about man, because he knew what was in man," (John 2:25). He understands humanity. He, therefore, is the One worthy to take the scroll and remove the seals. So John sees him here with the seven-sealed scroll in his hands.

XI. V7: He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb.

- A. So now we are going to get an extended picture of worship – which last week I argued fixed a lot of problems:
 - 1. It completed us.
 - 2. It brings our hearts into alignment.
- B. And here the worship is around the lamb.

XII. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people.

- A. Harps represent the praise of creation. Everything will join in this celebration. Right now everything is damaged by sin. Then, everything will be back in tune.

XIII. And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

- A. Sounds like the Gospel to me. Jesus was slain for us. He buys us back with his blood. And he makes us priests to serve God.

XIV. V11: Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

- A. This sounds like quite a worship night. Can you imagine. The hugest of choirs - and all kinds of multisensory events and additions to it.
- B. There are a few things here you must not miss:
 - 1. First: We have just switched from the worship of God the Father – the Ancient of Days who sits on the throne - to the worship of God the Father and God the Son – the Redeemer, the Lamb of God.
 - 2. Second: We are worshipping the Lamb principally because He died for us. It is not his teaching, not his wonderful life of compassion, or his miracles and wonders, not his power, but the shedding of his blood for sinners of every age.⁴
 - 3. Third: We have been made priests of this kingdom – which likely means we are to carry ourselves as he did. We are to rule by serving.
- C. This third point is the most unsettling part of this passage. I’m not sure I know how to unpack it.
 - 1. I know from studying history that the church seldom does its best work when it has power. I know from this passage and others that although most conquerors do so with power, brute force and manipulation – or money – that God achieves his way often through sacrifice and what looks like weakness⁵ (which is suspect isn’t weakness at all).

2. And I know that this is really hard for us to get. I remember hearing a sermon on this passage by a retired member of the special forces. And it was fun to hear. His stories were amazing. But, he had a Rambo Jesus. And it was odd in that the passage sets you up for a Rambo, Jason Bourne, Cline Eastwood, Jesus, but then when he shows up,

3. We need to deal with the idea that in Christ's kingdom the first are last, the greatest washes the feet of the least, the way up is down, the lion who conquers does so as a lamb that is slain.

4. We need to wrestle with the fact that the cross – that looked like the greatest loss – was the greatest victory and heaven will throw an eternal party to celebrate the one who was qualified to open the seal.

5. We need to deal with the fact that the way heaven sees things – the way heaven keeps score – is very different than the way we do down here..

XV. V13: Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

A. You will recognize that this is the same scene that is presented by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians. He says:

1. Because he was obedient unto death: "God has highly exalted him and given him the Name that is above every other name, that at the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth [the same divisions John sees], and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father," (Philippians 2:9-11).

XVI. V14: The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

A. This is the basis for Handel's closing choruses in *The Messiah*. It closes with one of the most beautiful musical numbers ever written, "Worthy is the Lamb." At the end of it everyone in the chorus joins in a repeated declaration, "Amen, Amen, Amen." It is a moving presentation, and the closest thing we have on earth to the scene described here.

XVII. When the seven-sealed scroll is fully opened, heaven and earth will join in this acknowledgment.

A. That is the goal of all history. Every historic event for these many centuries is related to and moves toward that final goal of history.

B. If you are in Christ, be encouraged. If you are suffering, be encouraged. He has suffered more; He knows what you are going through; He has bought you back and everything is moving towards a glorious climax.

C. If you are in Christ – there cannot be a better or bigger ending than the one ahead of us.

D. And if you are not, realize what is at stake. You will worship Christ. Everyone will be involved in this worship, but the question will be, "Which group will you be with?" Will you stand with those who gladly confess the Lordship of Jesus, or will you be with those who reluctantly acknowledge that he is right and they are wrong?

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir*, p. 244

² There seems to be some allusion to Matt. 22:41f

³ I got this string of words from a sermon by David Platt.

⁴ We should never take the cup of communion without thinking of the words of Peter in I Peter 1:19, "We are not redeemed with corruptible things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ as of a Lamb without blemish and without fault,"

⁵ I Cor. 1:25f