

THE LION AND THE LAMB

Revelation 5:1-7

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, December 16, 2012

And 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." (Rev. 5:5).

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell is considered one of the leading atheistic thinkers of the Twentieth Century. Russell asserted that history is the chance product of a causeless series of events. He wrote that man's "origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of random collocations of atoms." Realists must accept, he insisted, "that all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system." Russell concluded: "Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."¹

As we turn in our study to the fifth chapter of Revelation, we discover the apostle John as one who briefly feels the despair of which Russell wrote. Seeing the scroll of the divine will in the hand of God, John hears that there is no one worthy to break the seals to open the scroll. In short, John contemplates a world without Christ, a history with no Mediator between God and man. Like Russell, John views this as a scene of deep despair. He writes: "I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it" (Rev. 5:4).

In this way, John felt how heartbreaking is the thought of a world without God and Jesus Christ. He saw what Bertrand Russell seems

¹ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 107.

not to have realized, that a foundation of despair is no foundation at all. Revelation 5 shows both the necessity of Christ for hope and meaning and the good news of Christ's coming as the Lamb who conquered by being slain. James Hamilton summarizes: "By his death and resurrection Jesus has taken control of history... Jesus is the one who will right the wrongs and heal the hurts and wipe away the tears."² John saw the good news of a Savior in Jesus Christ as the only foundation not for despair but for hope, since it bears a message not of cosmic extinction but of eternal life by the saving will of God.

NO ONE WORTHY

In Revelation 4, John was admitted through a door into heaven to see the worship around God's throne. In chapter 5, John tells us what he continued to see, starting with an object in the hand of God: "Then 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" (Rev. 5:1). This scroll and the opening of its seals play an important role in Revelation, providing material for the chapters to come.

There are a number of theories about this scroll, four of which are most notable. First, some believe the scroll is the last will and testament of Jesus, containing what Peter described as "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4). A second view holds that the scroll in God's hand is the "book of life" that contains the names of those who have been redeemed by Christ. The problem with both of these views is that when the seals are broken, the scroll reveals not Christ's blessings on his people but the outpouring of God's judgments on the earth.

A third view asserts that the scroll is the Old Testament as brought to full explanation by Jesus. It is true, as Jesus insisted, that "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets... all the Scriptures [taught] concerning himself" (Lk. 24:27). Nonetheless, there is nothing in Revelation to suggest that this scroll is the Old Testament.

Fourth, the best understanding of the scroll in chapter 5 is the entirety of God's will for history, both in judging the wicked and in redeeming his people. This scroll is written on both sides, showing that it contains the entire story of God's will. According to William

² James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 151.

Hendriksen, the scroll “symbolizes God’s purpose with respect to the entire universe throughout history, and concerning all creatures in all ages and to all eternity.”³ G. B. Caird comments: “the scroll is God’s redemptive plan, foreshadowed in the Old Testament, by which he means to assert his sovereignty over a sinful world and so to achieve the purpose of creation.”⁴

The appearing of this scroll raised an immediate problem, however. John “saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’” (Rev. 5:2). He finds that there must be one with the worthiness and right to stand before God, receive the scroll, and open its seals. Unless this could happen, the content of God’s book would not be revealed and the will of God for history would not be performed. Vern Poythress explains, “The destiny of John, of the church, and of the universe itself hangs in the balance over the question of whether someone can open the scroll.”⁵ John laments, because “no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into it” (Rev. 5:3). This realization shattered him: “and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it” (Rev. 5:4).

Undoubtedly, part of John’s weeping arose from his awareness of his own unworthiness and of the entire human race. Man was created by God to exercise his authority, which is why God blessed Adam with dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). Adam fell from that authority, however, by violating God’s commandment. When Adam sinned (Gen. 3:6), he plummeted himself and all his descendants into the state of guilt and corruption. As a man, John now looks upon the scroll and hears that none is worthy to open it, and he tastes the bitterness of man’s sinful condition. Philip Hughes remarks how this scene shows that “there is nothing more deplorable and more calamitous in the story of mankind than our total unworthiness as sinful creatures in the presence of our Maker. Nothing is more lamentable than the fact that by our own ungodliness we have deprived ourselves of all worthiness.”⁶

³ William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940, 1967), 89.

⁴ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (San Francisco: Harper, 1966), 72.

⁵ Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 109.

⁶ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), #.

John must further have wept over the unopened scroll because of the blessings promised to believers that could only be revealed by the breaking of its seals. Hendriksen writes:

You will understand the meaning of these tears if you constantly bear in mind that in this beautiful vision the opening of the scroll by breaking the seals indicates the execution of God's plan. When the scroll is opened and the seals are broken, then the universe is governed in the interest of the Church. Then, God's glorious, redemptive purpose is being realized; His plan is being carried out and the contents of the scroll come to pass in the history of the universe. But if the scroll is not opened it means that there will be no protection for God's children in the hours of bitter trial; no judgments upon a persecuting world; no ultimate triumph for believers; no new heaven and earth; no future inheritance."⁷

In a way that is analogous to John's weeping, Christians are sometimes grieved when God's will seems frustrated in our experience. We look on the church and see compromise and decline. Like the Christians to whom John was writing, we may even face persecution for our witness to the gospel. We may feel similar frustration in our families, as covenant children go astray or marriage vows are broken. How is it that we fall short of the blessings designed for God's covenant people? As John learned, the answer will often be our own disobedience and sin, the wages of which bring us to tears. Like John, we will only find relief through the appearing of Jesus in victory, which is the message of verses 5-7.

WEEP NO MORE

It is probably significant that relief comes to John not from an angel, who knows no bitterness for sin, but from a fellow redeemed believer: "one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more.'" As one who equally relies on the saving work of Christ, the elder cries: "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" (Rev. 5:5).

This is the only Bible verse that refers to Jesus as the "Lion of Judah," yet the image is so inspiring that it is one of Christ's titles that is most beloved to Christians. This title sees in Jesus the fulfillment of Jacob's prophecy when he departed from his sons. "Judah is a lion's

⁷ Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 89.

cub,” Jacob said, and foresaw a royal dynasty emerging from this tribe (Gen. 49:9-10). Jesus was that promised heir from Judah, the divine warrior who rules history like a lion who reigns unchallenged over his domain.

Jesus is secondly referred to as “the Root of David” (Rev. 5:5). This title is based on the prophecy of Isaiah 11, which sees God bringing peace to the earth: “They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9). This blessed state will be secured by the one who comes as “the root of Jesse” (Isa. 11:10), who was David’s father. The house of David would be almost cut off because of sin, Isaiah said, yet “a shoot” would come “from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit” (Isa. 11:1). This promise describes Jesus, who was born of the line of David when that household seemed virtually snuffed out and came in the power of God’s Spirit to bring salvation to earth. As the Lion of Judah and the Root of David, Jesus embodies the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and gives proof that God’s saving plan is being achieved.

Hearing these words must have lifted John’s heart, but the sight that followed was even more dramatic: “And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain” (Rev. 5:6). How astonishing this is: John is told of a lion but upon looking he sees a lamb! One reason for this transformed appearance is where Jesus stood: “between the throne... and among the elders,” that is, in the mediator’s position between God and man. Though he is a lion, Jesus reconciles his people to God through his ministry as the Lamb.

Jesus’ appearance as both lion and lamb is part of his glory as the incarnate Savior for his people. We know from experience that a person is usually either lion-like, strong and dominating, or lamb-like, meek in servanthood. But Christ joins these virtues in perfect balance and harmony. In a sermon titled, “The Excellency of Christ,” Jonathan Edwards marveled at this combination of apparent contradictions. Christ “is thus above all, yet He is lowest of all in humility.... In the person of Christ meet together infinite majesty and transcendent meekness.”⁸ As the Lion, Jesus wields God’s sovereign power to rule. As the Lamb, he exercises a spirit of obedience. Jesus,

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Altogether Lovely* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 21-24.

alone among all mankind, could declare: “I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love” (Jn. 15:10). Jesus is thus worthy as true God and perfect man, Lion and Lamb, Lord and servant.

It is significant that John saw the Lamb “standing, as though it had been slain.” The idea is that he endured death but emerged victorious. He stands with emblems of his spiritual equipping: “with seven horns and with seven eyes” (Rev. 5:6). In the Bible, horns are symbols of power lifted up against one’s enemies. “Seven horns” means complete power, that is, divine omnipotence. The seven eyes, John says, “are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth” (Rev. 5:6), that is, the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 11:2 says of the root of Jesse: “the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” Jesus is fully animated by the Holy Spirit and thus is worthy in divine power to take and open the scroll, that is, to reveal and accomplish God’s saving will.

Perhaps most significant of all in this vision, Jesus the Lion, in his divine omnipotence, has conquered by the work he performed as the Lamb. The one who “conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” stands as a Lamb that had been slain. Jesus is referred to as a lamb 28 times in Revelation, marking his atoning death as the central achievement that accomplished his victory for his people. Vern Poythress marvels at this as what he calls “the central paradox and mystery of the Christian faith,” that “God achieved his triumph and delivered his people not through the fireworks of military might, but through the weakness of crucifixion.”⁹

The atoning work of the slain lamb was introduced at the scene of the first sin, in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had broken God’s command, the penalty of which was death. God declared the gospel by providing a substitute to suffer death in their place, satisfying God’s justice against their sin: “the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21). James Boice writes that the “sacrifice of the animals taught the principle of vicarious atonement, the innocent dying for the guilty, while the use of their skins to clothe Adam and Eve taught the principle of an

⁹ Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 109.

imputed righteousness,”¹⁰ that is, the righteousness earned by Christ but credited to those who believe in him.

Throughout the Old Testament the sacrifices of animals continued, reminding God’s people that their sins could only be removed by the death of a worthy sacrifice. In the Passover, Israel was delivered from Egypt by the lamb’s blood that warded against the angel of death. On the annual Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the holy of holies with the lamb’s sacrificial blood to turn away God’s wrath from the people. These were powerful pictures of the reality that was achieved by Jesus when he died on the cross. Jesus explained to the Emmaus Road disciples, who were dismayed by his crucifixion, that this was the central teaching of the Old Testament: “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Lk. 24:26). It was by stepping forth as the true sacrificial Lamb, bearing the sins of his people, that Jesus conquered and removed the barrier to God’s saving will: he bore the guilt of sin under God’s law and freed his people from the penalty they deserved. Therefore, when John saw that the Lamb “went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne” (Rev. 5:7), he was witnessing the exaltation of Christ to the seat of authority in heaven with the Father, after his atoning death and victorious resurrection from the grave. Here is John’s reply to Bertrand Russell and other skeptics who deny any foundation for hope in this world! William Hendriksen comments: “Christ, as Mediator, at His ascension received authority to rule the universe according to God’s eternal decree... As a reward for his redemptive work, Christ, on ascending into heaven, received for Himself the kingdom.”¹¹ No wonder that John should “weep no more” (Rev. 5:5), for the enthroned Lamb will open the scroll of God’s will. Moreover, John saw that despite his own failure and the failure of his entire race in sin, the Lion of Judah will rule with power to save those joined to him through faith.

CONQUERING THROUGH THE LAMB

In observing Jesus conquering not with the Lion’s teeth but with the Lamb’s dying wounds, Christians gain important insights into how we are said to conquer with him through faith. In each of the seven

¹⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 15:8.

¹¹ Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 90-1.

letters to the churches in chapters 2 and 3, Jesus exhorted that salvation would come only “to the one who conquers.” It is from the vantage point of chapter 5 that we can more fully understand what it means to conquer through faith in Christ.

First, since Jesus conquered by dying for sin, the first step in our spiritual victory must always be to receive his saving work through faith alone. Before we do anything with or for Christ, we must be saved by his conquering work. John explained this in his first epistle. First, he reminded us that forgiveness of sins before God is the universal need of mankind: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:8). The next verse gives the remedy: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). John elaborated: “if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn. 2:1-2). To propitiate is to turn aside wrath. Jesus must atone for our sins by his death, turning aside the wrath of God which we have deserved. Have you confessed your sin and called on Jesus, the Lamb of God, to take away your sins? Until you have, there is no spiritual achievement that can overcome this obstacle to your acceptance with God and no payment you can make to remove the condemning guilt of your sin. Is your life overcome with sorrow or regret, like John’s weeping when he saw the unworthiness of his and every other sinner’s life? Salvation begins by coming to Jesus to be cleansed, forgiven, and renewed. John’s message in the first chapter of his Gospel is therefore the first message we must hear and believe for salvation: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29).

Having first been saved, only then are we to conquer in the example of Christ, ministering and serving not only as lions but also as lambs. The combination we see in Jesus is only possible in us through the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit; it is in fact a sign of true spirituality for Christians to wield the lion’s spiritual power in the gentleness and meekness of the lamb. We are to be lions in spiritual strength and faithfulness and lambs in our manner of dealing with sinners and sin. To conquer as followers of Christ is to suffer for the gospel, placing the eternal well-being even of others – even enemies – ahead of our own earthly good. Peter wrote: “to this you have been

called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). Like Jesus, it will often be by suffering loss out of obedience and faith that we make our greatest spiritual impact on the world. Like Jesus we know that lions of faith must conquer in the way of the lamb, and that the crown of eternal life is worn only by those who first have carried the cross.

Corrie ten Boom was one who learned to trust Jesus as both Lion and Lamb. When the army of Nazi Germany swept through Western Europe in 1940 and its swastika-wearing tyrants took over Holland, Corrie’s family faced a situation not unlike the one looming before the churches of Asia in the time of the apostle John. As caring followers of Jesus, the ten Boom’s risked their lives to harbor Jews from the German Gestapo, until an informer notified the Nazis and Corrie’s family was arrested and sent to a concentration camp.

In the brutal Ravensbrook camp, Corrie and her sister Betsie learned to rely on Christ the Lion, whose power protected and saved them. At one point Betsie became ill and could only be sustained with drops from a small vitamin bottle. There could only be a few days’ syrup in the bottle, but Corrie found that it never ran out. She was tempted to hoard the precious medicine for her failing sister, but decided to trust Christ by sharing with everyone in need and then to pray. She later recalled, “every time I tilted the little bottle, a drop appeared at the tip of the glass stopper.” The bottle lasted far beyond what was physically possible, until Betsie improved. Towards the end of the war, Corrie heard her name called out during a roll-call. Certain that she was summoned for execution, she instead received a card marked “Released.” She was given back her possessions along with a railway pass to Holland. She later learned that it had been an administrative mistake and that a week afterward all the women in her cell had been put to death. In these and other ways, she witnessed the power of the lion of Judah to overcome evil and save.¹²

It was after the war, however, that Corrie fully learned of the conquest of Jesus the Lamb. Because of her remarkable story, she became a popular speaker and often shared the gospel with her hearers. On one occasion after speaking of Christ’s forgiveness, she was met at the back by one of the former S.S. guards at the Ravensbruck camp. He had been a brutal man, who mocked and tormented Corrie and the

¹² Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (New York: Bantam, 1971) 202-203.

other women prisoners. Now he came up to her after the service, bowed and said, “How grateful I am for your message, *Fraulein*. To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!” It was at this moment that Corrie learned fully to conquer in the steps of the Lamb who was slain, the Savior who died for those who sinned against him. She related what happened:

“His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often... the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him...

“As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.”¹³

John rejoiced to see Jesus as the Lion who conquered as Lamb. Through faith in him, Christians conquer in many ways. We repent of sin, we uphold biblical truth, we witness and lead others to salvation. The power of the Lion upholds us through many trials. But we are most like Jesus when we conquer through the mercy and sacrificial love by which he took up the cross as the Lamb, forgiving those who sin against us and reaching out with grace for those who are lost. Surely, it was especially for those who follow in the meek submission of the Lamb who was slain that Jesus promised: “The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev. 3:21).

¹³ Corrie ten Boom, *Ibid*, 215.