WORTHY IS THE LAMB

Revelation 4:1–5:14

Key Verses: 5:9,10

“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.’”

In Handel’s world-famous work, “The Messiah,” the heart-moving chorus “Worthy is the Lamb” comes at the very end of two hours of glorious music. But here, the chorus it’s actually based on in the Bible, comes at the beginning of Revelation, in chapter 5, with 17 more chapters to follow. We’re going to see that there’s much drama and great struggles in these chapters. But the end is a foregone conclusion, because “Worthy is the Lamb!” In Revelation 4 and 5 we’re taken along with the author John into a very special place, the very throne room of God in heaven. What we see there is highly symbolic. But the main point is to help us get answers to some questions: Who is God in heaven, and what’s he like? Who is Jesus, and what’s he like? What do they have to do with what’s going on down here right now in this real world? A lot more than we might think. We especially want to learn in this study about worship, about what Jesus came to do, and why he’s worthy of all our worship. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Look at 4:1. In Revelation we’re going to see at several pivotal moments that heaven is opened (11:19; 15:5; 19:11). Here, the door to heaven is opened to John. Jesus invites him to come up, look around, and especially see what’s going to take place. What does he see? Look at verse 2. He sees a throne with someone sitting on it. This throne is repeated 16 times in these two chapters alone, and it’s repeated many more times in Revelation (6:16; 7:10,15; 19:4; 20:11; 21:5). Why is this throne and the one seated on it so important? It reveals that God is in control. God is reigning. God is ruling this world. Our world can seem so troubling, so out of control sometimes. But God is still on his throne.

John goes on to describe this scene of the throne. Look at verse 3. Here, the precious stones of jasper and ruby show us the glory of God, as does the rainbow that looks like emerald (21:11,18–20). God is glorious beyond our imagination. Look at verse 4. Here we’re introduced to 24 elders. They’re mentioned often in these two chapters (4:4,10; 5:6,8,10,14). They could represent the 24 divisions of priests in the temple (1Ch24), or the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles (21:12–14). In any case, the elders represent all God’s people of all time. And these elders are not the focus; they’re all encircling God on his throne. They’re dressed in white and have crowns of gold on their heads. They all have their own thrones, but they’re not sitting on them. Look at verse 10. The elders are constantly falling down, laying their crowns before the throne and worshipping God. John continues to describe the throne. Look at verse 5a. The thunder and lightning reveal the majesty and power of God on his throne, a majesty and power that can shake this world. Look at verse 5b. These blazing lamps show that God lives in unapproachable light (1Ti6:16). They also represent God’s mighty Spirit who can shine God’s light into any kind of darkness. Look at verse 6a. The sea of glass reflects God’s glory and symbolizes God’s great peace, which is such a contrast with this chaotic world.

Next, John introduces us to some fascinating beings. Look at verses 6b–8a. They are the four living creatures. In the ancient world people carved images of creatures into wood or stone to represent the gods they believed in. But these are “living” creatures, and they’re not gods; they’re worshipping God. Their distinctive characteristics may reflect God’s attributes: the lion, courage; the ox, faithfulness, the man, intelligence, and the eagle, sovereignty. God is courageous, faithful, wise and sovereign. Perhaps one meaning here is that as we worship him, we too become like him in these attributes. The creatures’ six wings are reminiscent of the seraphim described around God’s throne in Isaiah 6. Here, they’re covered with eyes, meaning they can see everything in all creation. But after looking at everything, they’re even more impressed with the one on the throne. Read verse 8b. Here their words are also similar to the seraphim’s words in Isaiah 6. First of all, they proclaim three times that God is holy. He’s so different from anything else in all creation. He’s so different especially from any human ruler. Most rulers sitting on thrones are totally corrupt, either before coming to power or after enjoying it. But God, who has all power, is totally holy. He’s absolute purity itself. Revelation repeatedly declares that he’s “the Lord God Almighty” (11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22). Human rulers may seem powerful, but it’s actually nothing but a smoke screen, like in the movie “The Wizard of Oz.” God is the only one who is almighty. They praise him as one who “was, and is, and is to come,” meaning he’s eternal. Human beings would like to get rid of him, but he was, and is, and is to come. Look at verses 9,10. When these living creatures give him glory, honor and thanks, all the elders are influenced and join them. Worship is influential. Read verse 11. They tell us that God is worthy to be worshipped, to receive glory, honor and power, because he is our Creator.

Worship is a major theme of the Book of Revelation. So many people are worshipping demons, or idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood (9:20). Many are deceived into worshipping the dragon and the beast and its image (13:4,8,12,15). An angel tells all people on earth not to be deceived, but instead: “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water” (14:7). God is still calling all people, including us, to repent and worship him.

Then chapter 5 opens with more dramatic elements. Look at verse 1. In this colorful, awesome throne room of God, John’s eyes zoom in on something in God’s right hand. It’s a fascinating scroll. Unusually, this scroll has writing on both sides and it’s sealed with seven seals. It means it’s completely authentic, and it can’t ever be changed by anyone. Being in God’s right hand heightens its importance even more. This scroll represents God’s will and God’s plan for all of creation. As we’ll see in Revelation, when these seven seals are opened, God unleashes his wrath on this rebellious world (6:16,17; 11:18; 14:10,19; 15:1,7; 16:1,19; 19:15). But he also remembers those who accepted his grace through his Son, and he saves them (7:10; 12:10; 19:1). It’s a sealed scroll here to symbolize that it’s God’s mystery (1:20; 10:7; 17:5,7). It’s a mystery, for ages past kept hidden in God (Eph1:9; 3:3,4,6,9; Col1:26,27; 2:2; 4:3). But actually it’s a mystery intended for all people.

Look at verse 2. The scroll is so sacred, so holy, so precious, that only someone worthy before God can come and open it. Opening the scroll means not just coming to know God’s mysterious will, but also causing it to start happening in the world. Angels are longing for God’s will to happen on earth (1Pe1:12). What happened when everyone heard the mighty angel’s loud voice? Look at verse 3. Not the four living creatures, not the 24 elders, not the rest of the angels or any saint alive or dead in history could step forward as someone worthy. So it seemed for a moment that God’s mysterious will would not come to pass. How did John respond to this? Look at verse 4. Why is John weeping so much? Why is he so interested in the scroll being opened? Without God’s scroll being opened, the devil would have his heyday on earth forever. John’s weeping shows how much he wants God’s will to be done on earth, how much he wants God to come down and save his suffering people.

Look at verse 5. An elder tells John not to weep. Instead, he tells him to look at someone. He calls him “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” and the “Root of David.” These titles refer to ancient prophecies about the coming of the Messiah (Ge49:9,10; Isa11:1,10). But what do these titles mean? Among all God’s creatures, a lion is strong and fearless, courageous and conquering. A root is something that when planted in the ground eventually bears much fruit. David was known as a man with the heart of a lion, the bravest fighter among any soldier (2Sa17:8,10). And David had deep roots. Through his father Jesse he was from the tribe of Judah, in fulfillment of the prophecy. For the future, God promised that one day one of David’s offspring would be King of God’s eternal kingdom (2Sa7:12,13). God’s whole intention in creating the people of Israel and giving them David as their king was to make them a fruitful vine in the world, to use them bring the rest of the world back to God. But because of their sins his people totally failed to carry out what God wanted. Now, at long last, Jesus actually fulfilled God’s plan. Romans 15:12 says, “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope” (cf. Isa11:10). Jesus himself says in Revelation 22:16 that he is “the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.” Jesus, “the Lion of Judah” and “the Root of David,” would fulfill God’s promises and God’s plan in history, and all nations find hope in him. This is part of the reason why he’s worthy to break the seals and open the scroll. Like a lion and like a root, Jesus is very strong, and, very fruitful (Jn15:1).

The elder also says he “has triumphed.” How did Jesus the Lion of Judah and the Root of David triumph? It’s so ironic: of all things, it was through his death on a cross. It’s a spiritual triumph. Nice words, but what *is* that*,* really? All of us were powerless, dead and condemned in our sins. The devil in his evil powers had us just where he wanted us. But Jesus triumphed over all these things “through the cross.” By being nailed to the cross he took away all the charges against us (Col2:9–15). It’s a paradox. Death on a cross looked like total defeat, humiliation and disgrace. But through death on a cross Jesus won the greatest victory. So in his Gospel account John repeatedly refers to Jesus’ death on a cross as his being “glorified” (Jn7:39; 12:16,23; 13:31,32; 17:1).

Look at verse 6a. Suddenly, John saw “a Lamb, looking as though it had been slain.” According to the elder’s words he was looking for the powerful lion, but he actually saw a slain lamb. Three times in this chapter John emphasizes that he was slain (6,9,12; cf. 13:8). Jesus the Lion of Judah became the slain Lamb of God. John recorded in his Gospel the words of John the Baptist, who said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn1:29) In one of his epistles John described Jesus as “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1Jn2:2). In both these verses John says Jesus was slain for the whole world. The Lion who became the Lamb is not proud, aggressive and rebellious like most conquerors, but humble, gentle and obedient (Jn1:14a; Php2:6–8).

Look at verse 6a again. It says that the Lamb is “standing at the center of the throne.” It’s shocking, because that’s the place reserved for God alone, the awesome Lord God Almighty. But it seems God has brought this humble, slain Lamb to be there to share his throne. It also says that now the Lamb is “encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.” It means the Lamb is becoming the focus and the object of their worship.

Then John adds one more description. Look at verse 6b. He says this Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes. At first it sounds ugly and freaky. But as we’ve seen, the number seven represents perfection and completion. So in fact, he’s most beautiful. The Lamb’s seven horns represent God’s perfect strength. And John calls his seven eyes “the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” It’s the fourth time these seven spirits are mentioned in Revelation (cf. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5). God actually is just one Spirit, the Holy Spirit. But “seven spirits” can also be translated as “the Sevenfold Spirit of God.” In 4:5 we saw that these seven spirits are blazing like lamps. John is emphasizing that sent by Jesus, God’s Spirit can reach every place anywhere in this dark world and complete God’s perfect work. God’s Spirit reminds us of Jesus and his words (Jn14:26). In this confusing, deceptive world God’s Spirit guides us into all the truth and enables us to testify about Jesus (Jn15:26; 16:13). God’s Spirit becomes our personal Advocate, our personal Comforter, and he helps self-righteous people become aware of their sins against God (Jn16:7,8). God’s people can seem so weak and helpless amidst all the forces of evil in this world. But Jesus the Lamb sees us and sends us God’s Spirit.

Look at verse 7. The Lamb was fully qualified to go right up to God on his throne and take the scroll from his right hand. Wow! Then what happened? Look at verse 8. They all immediately fell down before the Lamb. Why? It was an act of worship. Later, when John fell at the feet of an angel to worship him, the angel told him, “Don’t do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!” (19:10) But here, the four living creatures and 24 elders fell down to worship the Lamb. It tells us that the Lamb is God himself (Jn1:1,2), fully worthy to be worshipped.

And what was their worship like? John saw that they each had a harp and a golden bowl of incense. The harps tell us that their worship was full of songs of praise. The golden bowls of incense tell us that their worship was full of prayer for all God’s suffering people (6:10). Verse 9a says that “they sang a new song.” Why was their song “new”? It was because something new had happened. The Lamb had done something no one else in history ever had or could do.

What did they sing? Read verses 9b,10. They praise the Lamb because he accomplished God’s salvation plan. How did he accomplish it? He was slain. He shed his own blood. And it says his blood purchased people for God. The Lamb’s blood was the ransom price to redeem people from slavery to sin and Satan. The blood of the Lamb becomes a crucial theme in the Book of Revelation. In 1:5 it says that he “loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.” Later we’ll see that his blood was shed to give us victory over all evil (7:14; 12:11). In the end, those who are washed in the blood of the Lamb have the right to eat of the tree of life and go through the gates into the city, the New Jerusalem (22:14). Our sins make us God’s enemies, living under his wrath. Our sins make us hostile to God. But Romans 3:25 says that God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood, to be received by faith. Romans 5:1 says that when we accept the blood of Jesus, we have peace with God. Romans 5:9 says, “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more will we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” 1 John 1:7 says that “the blood of Jesus…purifies us from all sin.” Hebrews 9:14 says that the blood of Christ cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God. The thing is, we really need to have personal faith in his blood (Ro3:25a). Here in verse 9 it says that with his blood the Lamb purchased us for God. The Book of Revelation raises maybe one of the biggest questions: “Who do I belong to?” Do I belong to Satan, or do I belong to God? We find in Revelation that many people have the mark of the beast; but then there is also a great multitude who’ve accepted the blood of the Lamb.

Look at verse 9b again. John emphasizes here that the Lamb purchased for God “people from every tribe and language and people and nation.” It’s the greatest miracle! It's not just politically correct multiculturalism; it comes from God; it's God's greatest vision. This was originally the same vision of the prophet Daniel (Da7:14,22,27). Later, John is going to describe it as “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language” (7:9). Though they’re so different, they all believe in Jesus and worship God. But it’s not going to happen easily, like world history is on autopilot. Instead, John tells us in Revelation that this eternal gospel still needs to be proclaimed to “every nation, tribe, language and people” (14:6). God wants all people on earth to have the chance to hear the good news of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus and be saved. It’s not to be done just through full-time religious professionals; it’s to be done by each person who sincerely believes in Jesus. Revelation tells us again and again that our testimony of our personal faith in Jesus and his blood is so important (1:2,9; 6:9; 12:11,17; 17:6; 19:10; 20:4). Even though it’s socially so hard to do, we should not love our lives so much that we’re too embarrassed to tell others about our faith in Jesus (12:11). A great way to share our faith in Jesus is to invite people to study the Bible with us personally. We also find in verse 9 what we should be praying for. We should be praying for people to really believe personally in the blood of Jesus.

People erect so many barriers between each other. Racism, prejudice, discrimination and misunderstanding are still so strong, and seemingly impossible to eradicate. But through his death on the cross and shed blood, Jesus can work a miracle: he can bring people who were far away from God and far away from each other into the closest fellowship (Eph2:12–21; 1Jn1:7). So Colossians 3:11 says, “Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”

Read verse 10 again. To appreciate this, we need to acknowledge that at first these people were not really a kingdom or priests serving God, and they certainly were not reigning on earth. They were all defeated by the devil and his temptations. They were all deceived by him and living in darkness. They were all enslaved by sin and by the power of death. They were all damaged and wounded, spiritually very sick. They were all without hope and without God in the world (Eph2:12b). But the Lamb who was slain shed his blood for them, and his blood has power to change people. His blood totally transforms any kind of person from a chronic slave of sin to someone who reigns in God’s kingdom and serves God. Look at verse 10b again. “…and they will reign on the earth.” Right now, God’s people are marginalized, oppressed and ignored. But God’s mysterious will is that those who accept the blood of Jesus and worship God will someday reign on the earth with him for ever and ever (20:4,6; 22:5). 2 Timothy 2:12a promises, “If we endure, we will also reign with him.”

Look at verse 11. At the news of what the Lamb has accomplished for God, the worship swells to an immense proportion. It’s a throng of angels too numerous to count. They encircle the living creature and the elders. Read verse 12. This is the fifth time in chapters 4 and 5 that the word “worthy” is repeated. The throng of angels were saying in a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb!” The devil tries to steal God’s glory and disparage the Lamb. The devil tries to confuse and discourage us and get us to live for our own glory. We need to hear the angels’ chorus, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain!” Of what is he worthy? It says, “to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” He already has all these things. So what does it mean that he’s worthy to receive them? It means he should receive them from us. We should worship him with all our power, all our wealth, all our wisdom, all our strength, all our honor, all our glory and all our praise. Sometimes it seems that pouring out our lives worshipping the Lamb is a waste, especially when it seems to have left us empty-handed and had absolutely no impact on anybody. But worshipping the Lamb is never a waste, because he’s worthy. And we see the worship gets even bigger. Read verse 13. Here it’s all creatures of our God and King, in heaven, on earth, on the sea, and all that is in them, worshiping and praising. And here at last, the one who sits on the throne and the Lamb are both worthy of equal worship.

So today we saw who we should worship, and how we can worship him. We can worship him through the blood of the Lamb. We also saw God's mysterious plan. He wants all people on earth to hear the good news of Jesus. We saw that the blood of Jesus can totally change people into those who worship and serve God. May God use us through our worship and testimony to bring the good news of Jesus' blood to others, especially to young people in our time.