

“Who is Worthy?”

Revelation 4 & 5

December 2, 2018

The morning I am going to preach from the New Testament Book of Revelation.

It would be interesting to do a survey right now of how you are responding to my announcement that I’m going to preach from the Book of Revelation. Some of you are probably excited. You’re saying to yourself, “Oh, good! I’ve always been fascinated by Revelation, and I’ve wondered what it’s all about. This will be good!”

Some of you are a bit more cautious. You’re thinking, “It’s the first Sunday of Advent. We’ve started the Christmas season. Shouldn’t we be hearing a sermon about the baby in the manger and the shepherds and the angels? The Book of Revelation? Really?”

And I suspect that there are some of you who have moved beyond caution to outright dread. You can think back to other preachers that you’ve heard and how they took some portion of Revelation and used it to make a prediction about what was going to happen in the world in the next five or ten years. And that prediction did not come true. So now you’re wondering what kind of wild prediction this preacher is going to make.

Oh, the Book of Revelation! What a mysterious yet fascinating book! Yes, it is a part of God’s inspired Word, but can anybody really understand it? And does it have any message for you and me today?

Understanding Revelation

Suppose we were to ask the followers of Jesus who first received the Book of Revelation if they understood it. What would they say? I’m quite sure that they would tell us that they did understand it. Why do I say that? There are three reasons why the early Christians understood Revelation so much better than we do.

Reason number one: the Christians of the first century were familiar with this kind of writing. All the puzzling symbols and weird creatures would not have caught them off guard the way they do us. From approximately 200 B.C. to A.D. 200 there were many books written in a style similar to what we find in Revelation. Most of us have never heard of those books, but people in the first century would have. So all those symbols and creatures would not have stunned and dazed them the way they do us.

Reason number two: the Christians of the first century were being persecuted. Revelation was written for persecuted Christians living in the land that we today call Turkey. What a contrast to our situation. You and I don’t really have any idea what it means to be persecuted for following Jesus Christ. So Revelation sometimes comes across to us as a fascinating puzzle to figure out. Maybe this is too strong to say, but sometimes I get the impression that for American Christians today Revelation is a form of pious entertainment. “Let’s see if we can put the pieces of the puzzle together.” That’s not the way that Christians in the first century looked at Revelation! For them Revelation spoke to the daily threats of persecution that they faced.

Reason number three: the Christians of the first century grasped the main points of Revelation without becoming immersed in the details. How do I know that's true? Look at Revelation 1:3. "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it . . ." That verse explains to us how the early Christians handled Revelation. One person would read the book out loud to the other Christians. One person would read it, and everybody else would just sit there and listen to it. Many of the people probably couldn't read at all. Those who could read didn't have copies of the Book of Revelation that they could read for themselves. They certainly didn't have Bibles with cross references and explanatory notes. In other words, they did not have the luxury to explore every fascinating detail in Revelation like we do today. They could only sit there, listen carefully, and grasp the main points.

The Message of Revelation

If you and I can resist the temptation to get bogged down in all the details of Revelation, we can understand it too. The main message of the book is really not that hard to understand. We can summarize it this way: "Jesus will win, so don't give in!" Perseverance is a theme that we find time and again in Revelation. Think of the seven letters to the churches that we find in Revelation 2 and 3. We find statements like this:

To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations. (Rev. 2:26; see also Rev. 2:7b, 10b, 17b; 3:5, 12, 21.)

There is the message of perseverance. Similar instructions are sprinkled throughout the book.

This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people. (Rev. 13:10b; see also 14:12; 22:7)

"Jesus will win, so don't give in!" Persevere! That's the message of Revelation. "Jesus will win, so don't give in!"

You might very well say, "If that's the message of Revelation, why didn't the apostle John, the author of the book, just say so?" It would have been so much easier!

Good question!

Think about the way that stories work. Let's compare the Book of Revelation to *Star Wars*. In some ways *Star Wars* is like Revelation. There are a lot of bizarre creatures and surprising twists and turns to the story.

I do realize that some of you have not seen any of the *Star Wars* movies. But even you know who Darth Vader is, don't you? Of course, you do! You walk into Target or Walmart, and there he is in some form or another. You look for pajamas for your cute little grandchild, and there is Darth Vader plastered on the front of them. You can't miss him!



So far eight of the original nine episodes of *Star Wars* have been filmed and released. There is only one more episode to go. I don't want to spoil that final episode for you, but I can tell you how it is going to turn out. I am 100% sure that in the end, the good guys are going to win. You know that's true,

don't you? The good guys are going to win! That's never been in doubt, has it? So why do we watch the *Star Wars* movies? Episode after episode, year after year—for old guys like me—it's been decade after decade. Why do we watch them when we all know that in the end the good guys are going to win?

The reason is simple. There is more to a story than simply knowing how it will end. Stories captivate us and excite us and inspire us. The characters are sometimes so memorable that we become attached to them—even when they are the bad guys like Darth Vader. Stories draw us in and stir our hearts.

That's true for *Star Wars* and all great stories. It's true for Revelation too. It's the things that surprise us in this book and that so often puzzle us that make Revelation so memorable. Who are the 144,000? What does 666 mean? What is the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven really going to be like? Those things imprint themselves on our minds. We can't forget them, and we're compelled to think about them. They all serve to reinforce the main message of the book: "Jesus will win, so don't give in!"

Revelation 4 & 5

Take a look with me at Revelation 4 and 5. These two chapters of Revelation are essential to understanding the whole book, and they deliver a message that we need to take to heart.

¹After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

Immediately questions flood into our minds. Will we really enter heaven through a door? Who exactly is the person who has a voice like a trumpet? Whoa! Remember the first century Christians. They don't have the luxury to immerse themselves in all those details. Neither do we. Let's keep reading.

²At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

"Someone sitting on it"? Who is it? John doesn't tell us. Read on!

³And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. ⁴Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.

Should we think of those elders as angels or humans? That's an interesting question, but it doesn't make a lot of difference. Let's move on like the Christians in the first century would have done. It's not just what John sees. It's what he hears too.

⁵From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.

Imagine a spring storm when there's a clap of thunder directly over your house!

In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. ⁶ Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

Let's stop here for a moment. We could take time to investigate so many things that we've just read. But what is the main point? We have entered into the throne room of God, and we are dazzled by all that we've seen. However we understand the details, the impression we are left with is one of awe-inspiring wonder at the majesty of God.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. ⁷ The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. ⁸ Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings.

These four creatures are hard to picture in our minds, aren't they? Different kinds of faces. Six wings. Wings with eyes all over them? If we were walking down the street and met one of these creatures, we would stop and stare to say the least! But look at what these remarkable creatures are doing. Their attention is not on themselves. They are entirely focused on someone else.

Day and night they never stop saying:

“Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.”

⁹ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever.

The inhabitants of heaven—as breathtaking and impressive as they are—can do nothing but fall down in the presence of God.

They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

¹¹ “You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.”

What a picture of worship! But the story continues in chapter 5, and the first verse of this chapter is key.

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.

We need to stop for a moment and think about that verse because today we don't have scrolls. We have texts and tweets but no scrolls.

In the first century scrolls were usually written on just one side. But this scroll is written on both sides. That means that it is packed with information and instructions. Here on this scroll is God's complete plan for the future. And the scroll is sealed with wax—not just once but seven times. In the first century those seals were a form of protection. Only the intended recipient could open them. If anybody else broke the seals, it would be immediately be evident. In today's terms we'd say that the scroll had been hacked. The seals on the scroll are there to make sure that only the right person will open the scroll. Only the person chosen by God will receive the authority to carry out his plan.

² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" ³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. ⁴ I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.

Let that sink in. No can open God's scroll! That glorious worship of God that we read about in Revelation 4 comes to a complete halt. Heaven comes to a standstill. No one in heaven is worthy of opening God's scroll. No one is capable of carrying out God's plans. The elders can't do it. They're aren't worthy. Those fantastic creatures with the six wings covered with eyes—no, they are not worthy either! Who can fulfill God's purposes for this world of ours?

⁵ 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."

⁶ 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. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. ⁹ 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.
¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."

Worship in heaven has resumed. Now it's not just God who is being worshiped. Jesus is being worshiped too!

¹¹ 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. ¹² 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!"

¹³ 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!”

¹⁴ The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

What a picture of Jesus we are given here! He is the mighty Lion who has become the sacrificial Lamb. His victory comes through his suffering. It is through his suffering that he fulfills God’s plan. And his plan is not just for a few people but for every people and tribe and language and nation. Therefore, he is worthy! He is worthy of our worship! He is worthy of our lives!

What a message for persecuted Christians who are suffering for their faith. Jesus is worthy of your suffering. He who suffered for you is worthy of your suffering for him. Jesus is worthy of all that you are going through, so don’t give in.

The Message of Revelation 4 & 5 for Us Today

Do you remember a couple of months ago hearing the story of Andrew Brunson? He’s the American pastor who had been serving a small church in Turkey for twenty-five years? Then he was charged with being a member of a terrorist organization and thrown into prison where he languished for almost two years. He had no idea if he would get out or not. That first year was unbearably hard. He said that if he had been released at the end of that first year, he would have been found lying on the floor curled up in a fetal position. Can you imagine that? But then God started to rebuild him. One of the things that God used to revive him was a little song that Brunson wrote for himself.



You are worthy, worthy of my all.
You are worthy, worthy of my all.
What can I give to the Son of God, Who gave himself for me?
Here I am; You are worthy of my all.¹

Imagine sitting in a Turkish prison not knowing whether you will ever get out and singing those words to God hour after hour, day after day, month after month. “You are worthy, worthy of my all. Here I am—locked away in this prison not knowing if I will ever get out. But you are worthy, Jesus, even of this.”

Revelation 4 and 5 is a message for first century and twenty-first century Christians who are being persecuted. But it is also contains a message for all of us who are followers of Jesus.

¹ Mindy Belz, “A Living Martyr,” *World*, November 24, 2018, 37-42.

All of us are having our faith challenged in some way. Isn't that true? Aren't there times when you feel like giving up? You are a believer in Jesus. You believe that he died on the cross for you, and you have experienced his love. And you do want to live for him and honor him day-in and day-out. But then there are those times when life seems to wear you out.

Some of us here today are fighting chronic health problems. We've prayed to God for his healing and his strength. And he has helped us, but not to the degree that we long for. It would be so easy to stop praying and let yourself drift away from God.

For some of us the challenge to our faith comes from our relationships. Our marriages and our families disappoint us. Or the people that we go to school with or the people that we work with mistreat us and make us feel worthless. Those relationships are difficult in and of themselves, but they also plant doubts in our minds and make us wonder if God himself really cares about us

For some of us the challenges come not from our present circumstances but from our past. For some reason we can't escape those painful memories. Some days we are OK, but other days those memories come sweeping over us and we feel totally demoralized and helpless. There are probably some of us here this morning who just this week have thought about taking our own lives. Life doesn't seem worth living any more. Why go on?

Take to heart the message of Revelation 4 and 5. Jesus is worthy of your all. He is worthy of your trust. Jesus is worthy of your continued obedience. Jesus is worthy of your perseverance. He who suffered for you is worthy of your suffering for him. Jesus is worthy, so don't give in or give up.

"Almighty God, this Christmas we plead with you to give us a new vision of Jesus. Remind us again that Jesus is not just the baby in the manger. He is the Lion of Judah and the Lamb who was slain. He is the one that you appointed to open the scroll and carry out your plan. May the message of Revelation captivate our hearts and help us to understand anew that your Son is worthy of all that we can possibly give him. Through our lives and to him be the power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise. Amen."

Video: Andrew Peterson's "Is He Worthy?" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Olahc83Kvp4>

Benediction

"Now to him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb that was slain, be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever!" And all the inhabitants of heaven and all of God's people on earth say, "Amen!" So be it. Amen!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
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