

WORTHY IS THE LAMB

SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

By Steve Zeisler

At the end of this series on prayer we have come to the end of the Bible and in fact the end of the age. The words of praise that we will hear articulated in Revelation 4 and 5 are not the prayers of the author, the apostle John. He is a witness to the words sung by others in the throne room of heaven. As we read John's record of these glorious expressions of praise, we'll realize that it is our destiny to participate in ascribing greatness to God. This is what we were made for.

We will do well to orient ourselves a bit to the Revelation before we study this text. John wrote the book when he was about ninety years old and the only one of the twelve apostles appointed by Jesus who was still living. Toward the end of his life, he pastored churches in the city of Ephesus and its environs, an area that is located in modern Turkey. He was opposed by enemies of the gospel and sent into solitary exile on a small, rocky island in the Mediterranean called Patmos. It turns out, to the consternation of his enemies, that in his exile, John, through this revelation, would become a seer for the church. He would encourage and propel the church forward much more effectively by the document he wrote on Patmos than by whatever he would have accomplished as a parish pastor. It has often occurred to me that if the devil really wanted to minimize the effectiveness of Christian leaders, he should give them too much money and just enough political power to seduce them away from paying attention to the Lord. But in difficult banishment on a rocky island, John was shown the Apocalypse that has strengthened Christian believers in every generation for nearly two thousand years.

In the Spirit

In the middle of Revelation 1 there is a dual reference to location: "I, John...was on the Island of Patmos...." A few clauses later John says, "I was in the Spirit...." In Greek "on" and "in" are the same word, and we are intended to notice the challenge of two life conditions. All believers participate in two realities at the same time.

Eugene Peterson has written this about worship:

Christians worship with a conviction that they are in the presence of God. Worship is an act of attention to the living God whose rule speaks and reveals, creates and redeems, orders and blesses. Outsiders observing these acts of worship see nothing like that. They see a few people singing unpopular songs, sometimes off key, someone reading from an old book and making remarks that may or may not interest the listeners; then eating and drinking small portions of bread and wine that are supposed to give nourishment to their eternal souls in the same way that beef and potatoes sustain their mortal flesh. Who is right? Is worship an actual meeting, called to order at God's initiative, in which persons of faith are blessed by his presence and respond to his salvation, or is it a pathetic and sometimes desperate charade in which people attempt to get God to pay attention to them and do something for them? (1)

The Revelation is daunting and fascinating for most Christians. Each of the recorded visions in it is vivid and breathtaking, and each is different from the rest. In them we see our Lord Jesus Christ in a number of different guises, engaging different circumstances. He is always the central figure or the climax toward which the events of the drama are heading.

In the first vision, which begins in chapter 1, John encounters the Lord as a shining and authoritative Commander, before whom he falls to the ground. This Commander walks as if around a map of Asia Minor, observing seven different churches, which are depicted as lamp stands. As he walks among them he comments about them, speaking a word of either encouragement or challenge to each. These are the churches John had served as pastor, churches he knew to be weak and inadequate in some cases, persecuted and struggling in other cases, hopeful and difficult all at the same time.

The second vision of Christ, which begins in chapter 4, is the one that we will focus on in this message. Here we'll meet Christ as a Lamb marked by blood and violence.

Praise for creation

After this I looked, and there before me [“behold!” connoting surprise would be a better translation than “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.” At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me** [behold!] **was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding 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. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass** [that is a basin filled with water], **clear as crystal.**

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. 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. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

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

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

**“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 an extraordinary experience for John to see heaven itself opened, and then to find himself caught up there in the Spirit! He saw an immense and almost indescribable scene, at the center of which was a throne with One seated on it. It is very clear that this throne is where we are to direct our attention. There were twenty-four minor thrones that ringed the great throne. There were four living creatures that surrounded it, and a basin filled with water in front of the throne. The seven spirits, the Holy Spirit of God represented as seven flames, were also before the throne. Every eye and every thought was focused upon that throne and the one seated there.

And everything here is perfect. It is orderly, beautiful, frightening, breathtaking. The cherubim say, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God.” Saying the word “holy” three times means God’s holiness is absolute. He is utter holiness—utter dignity and beauty and righteousness. They also praise him for his immutability. He was and is and always will be himself. There is no crack, no change, no shadow.

We can aspire to sing someday these words of praise that fill the heavens, even as we do now, but in language that is even more worthy of God, not just the human speech that we are limited to here.

At the end of chapter 4 living creatures are singing praise to their Creator. God is known by those whom he has made, and they speak to him as to their owner, subordinate to him and privileged to worship him.

You may be familiar with C. S. Lewis’ science fiction trilogy (2). The hero is a man named Ransom who travels from earth to Mars and later to Venus. In this trilogy the Christian theology breaks out of the sphere of the earth. When Ransom gets to Mars and Venus, he encounters other beings who know and love God. And everywhere else in the universe people have familiar conversation with angels, they are aware of God’s presence, and they appreciate him in creative, beautiful, interesting, and adventurous environments. God is known and appreciated everywhere except one place—Earth. Those on Mars and Venus refer to Earth as “the silent planet.” It is the dark planet. There are clouds around it through which the light cannot penetrate. It is the place of rebellion, the broken place, the one element in all creation that doesn’t work right.

The more we consider John’s vision in Revelation 4, the more we realize that nowhere present or even possible in this scene are the stained, the failed, the needy. They do not belong. His creation sings,

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

They praise him from hearts filled with thanksgiving. But what about the churches John had served, places like Laodicea, “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked”? Jesus stands at the door and knocks for them to let him in. Where are these broken folks, these lost souls?

Now we turn to chapter 5. As beautiful as the song sung by creatures to the Creator was, we’ll discover an even greater song in this chapter. Verses 1-14:

Salvation’s song

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 [a scroll that is sealed shut at seven different points along its rolled up length]. 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. 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.”

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain [with marks of slaughter on him], standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He came 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. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song:

**“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased men for God
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.”**

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 sang:

**“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”**

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

**“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!”**

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

In this chapter are new elements that are introduced into the heavenly throne room. First there is a scroll. John sees for the first time that there is a story that has not been told in God’s presence yet, and he knows that it is the story of “the silent planet,” the broken people. He knows that that scroll tells the story of war and sorrow and persecution and salvation and victory.

A second new element is John's weeping. Could anybody open the scroll? Was the human race going to be given a place? Were folks like John and the people he pastored and loved ever going to be allowed to sing in this perfect place? Could anyone tell earth's story in heaven?

Third, there is reference to a lion, which is not surprising. A lion is a regal, powerful figure, and would fit well among the living creatures we've seen. But when John turned he saw not a lion but a Lamb, with the marks of slaughter on it! And we read in verses 5 and 6 that the Lamb himself was now in the center of the throne, where God, the Father, had been the central focus. Presumably the Father was still the center of everything and all eyes were on him, all words were being spoken to him—but what was this broken, bloody, sacrifice doing enthroned with the One of immutable holiness?

The Lamb was capable of telling earth's story, and he would make those from "the silent planet" welcome in heaven. He would break the seals and let folks like us in. Consider the praises offered to him. This one had bought human rebels for God, paid a price to welcome us. Verse 9:

“And with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.”

Is there anything more longed for these days than a bridge across the divisions between nations, peoples, ethnicities, languages, and backgrounds, across the hatreds that are tearing apart our planet? Is there anything more longed for in the contemporary world than some way of making one kingdom out of all these diverse peoples? Every language and people and nation are joined together into one kingdom because all of us come to God as sinners whose salvation is purchased by his blood.

We are also told in these words of praise that those who came would be made priests, and that they would serve as kings on earth. They would be given back not only the right to speak of God but the right to reign on earth.

Rich Mullins wrote a song some years ago. One of the lines in the song:

*If I were a painter I don't know which I'd paint:
the calling of the ancient stars, or the assembling of the saints.*

There are two great themes that last forever. One is the creation itself, the calling of the ancient stars. Creatures praise their Creator from full hearts for his holiness. But there is another great theme, and that is the assembling of the saints, a new song of salvation. Salvation's song is grander and more breathtaking. Twenty-four elders and four living creatures sang to God as Creator. But there are numberless choirs of angels that fill the universe around the throne, that are singing salvation's song, and they can't contain themselves. The angels are joined by every creature on earth and in heaven and in the sea. The song grows larger. The Lamb at the center of the throne, seated with his Father, is adored for saving those who are lost. The words of chapter 5 intensify everything in chapter 4.

Reading on in the Revelation, when the Lamb breaks the seals and opens the scroll and earth's story is told in God's presence, it is terrible! Six seals have been opened in 7:13-17:

“Then one of the elders asked me, ‘These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?’

I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’

And he said, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore,

‘they are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.
Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat upon them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;
he will lead them to springs of living water.
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”

The residents of “the silent planet” will sing the greatest song. The Lamb will be our shepherd. The glorious One who “created all things” will reach down with his great cloth and wipe the tears from our eyes.

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!”

NOTES

- (1) Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, © 1988, Harper & Row, New York. P. 59.
- (2) C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*. All rights reserved.

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Catalog No. 4721
Revelation 4:1-11; 5:1-14
11th Message
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October 7, 2001

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