

“The Lamb upon the Throne”
Revelation 5:1-14
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In his vision as reported in chapter 4 John was given to see a throne in heaven with someone of great majesty sitting upon it and with heavenly beings ranged around it. As the vision continued, John saw two more things: *first* a scroll, that is, the book of history, the sealed record of both history and the unknown future *and second* a lamb standing before the throne. This lamb will open the scroll, which is to say he will interpret and control the course of events that is written beforehand in the scroll. It is interesting to observe that there is nothing in chapter 4 that could not have been written by a non-Christian Jew. But here in chapter 5 the vision becomes specifically, obviously and emphatically Christian.

Text Comment

v.1 There are various interpretations of this scroll, but the one that best fits the larger context is that it is the record of God’s plan for the world, a plan that includes both the judgment of the wicked and the salvation of God’s people. As we will see as the vision continues, the contents of the scroll will carry us both backward and forward in history. The scroll is sealed with seven seals. Seven being the number of completeness, the thought is that the contents of the scroll are completely hidden; no one can peak inside the scroll to learn ahead of time what is to come to pass. The breaking of the seals, narrated in chapter 6 and in 8:1, brings to pass events in the world. That is, the opening of the scroll does not merely disclose an historical record; in John’s vision it sets the divine will in motion to accomplish God’s purpose and to bring history to its predestined conclusion.

If you remember, Ezekiel was given a scroll in preparation for his prophetic ministry and that scroll likewise had writing on both sides (2:1-10). Both there in Ezekiel 2 and here in Revelation 5 the point of the writing on both sides seems to be that it indicates that the story has been completely written; there is no room left for additions or changes.

v.2 The question is: “who in the created order has sovereign authority over God’s plan of judgment and redemption?” [Beale, 340] God himself is worthy, of course, as we already heard at the end of chapter 4, but God is not going to open the scroll. He has required that it be opened by someone else.

v.4 John wept because, as we said, in terms of the vision until the scroll is opened history cannot come to its consummation and if no one is worthy to open the scroll history will not unfold in the interests of the kingdom of God.

v.5 The first way of identifying the one able to open the scroll is as the Messiah, the King who would arise from the seed of David. And he has triumphed! Throughout the whole course of the book it is going to be clear that the future and final victory of the Messiah and his kingdom is but an extension and outworking of the victory he has already won over sin, death, and the Devil at the cross and the empty tomb. The paragraph division,

remember, is artificial, added by the NIV editors. Clearly the identification of v. 5 is that of the figure now described in v. 6. [Caird, 73]

v.6 *The Lion is the Lamb!* That is what the Jews did not grasp when Jesus was among them and when, of his own free will, he went to the cross. It was the Messiah's primary ministry and calling to offer himself a sacrifice for the sins of his people. *The Lion is the Lamb!* The term "lamb" always carries with it the implied reference to a sacrificial death. So the Lion, the King who is going to open the seals is the very one who gave his life to redeem his people. There is no other way to accomplish the divine purpose for the world than through the death of Jesus on the cross. History is a complete enigma, in other words, apart from the redemptive plan of God in Jesus Christ.

v.6 The horn is a typical symbol of strength in the Bible so seven horns is omnipotence; the seven eyes are a symbol of perfect knowledge or omniscience. Remember Paul's identification of Jesus in 1 Cor. 1:24 as "the power of God and the wisdom of God." We have said previously that the "seven spirits" are John's way of speaking of the fullness of the Holy Spirit and the rest of the NT makes clear that it is at the Lord Christ's behest that the Holy Spirit works in the world; he is the Savior's gift to the world and to his church and does Christ's work in the world. As Peter reminds us in his Pentecost sermon, it was Jesus who sent the Holy Spirit and it was because of the Lord's death and resurrection that the Spirit is given to the world.

The location of the Lamb is actually given with some ambiguity. Taking the description in context the sense seems to be that the Lamb was standing between the throne and the angelic host that was surrounding the throne. Otherwise, we are to imagine the Lamb somehow together with the Father on the throne. A harder thing to visualize but as we are going to see visualization is not essential in John's visionary descriptions.

v.7 What simpler or more beautiful way could be found of making the point that history is under God's control and that the Father has appointed his Son, Jesus Christ, to bring it to its proper conclusion than for the Lamb to receive this scroll from the hand of God the Father sitting upon the heavenly throne. Direct authority over the world and its history is, as it were, transferred from the Father to the Son. [Osborne, 257]

v.8 When heaven saw the scroll being handed from Father to Son it broke out in a great hymn of praise. The harp or lyre was traditionally an instrument used in the praise of God – it is mentioned frequently in the Psalms – and John will mention it several more times in this book in regard to music played in heaven (14:2; 15:2) Think of it as the string section of the orchestra, providing the dominant sound.

Incense was from long ago the symbol of the people's prayers, because the smoke and the smell of burning incense ascend, as it were, to heaven. Here these are prayers for the coming of the kingdom of God. In a manner typical of Apocalyptic visions John piles one symbol on top of the other. We are not to attempt to visualize how an angel can hold and play a harp *and* at the same time hold a bowl of incense! [Beale, 347] Remember, this is all symbolism, the representation of true things, not a literal description. God can be

represented as a sort of human figure on a throne, but, as the Bible says often enough, he is not a human figure sitting on a throne! He has no hand with which to hand the scroll to his Son and so on.

- v.9 The heavenly choir breaks out in joyful song. This is, by the way, the only place in the Bible where we have evidence that angels sing! So when the angels who appeared to the shepherds are reported in Luke 2 to have *said* “Glory to God in the heavens and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” we have every right to imagine those words being *sung* not simply said. In fact here in vv. 12 and 13 where we have “sang” and “singing” again, the Greek words are actually “said” and “saying.” The NIV’s perfectly proper translation of “said” by “sung” in vv. 12 and 13 harks back to the word “sang” here in v. 9. When you are singing, after all, you *say* things musically. Not only may the angels of Bethlehem have *sung* their song to the shepherds – the text of their message is, as you know, in poetic form – but in my view they probably sang it to Handel’s music! In Zephaniah 3:17 we actually have a reference to the Lord singing. Singing is as important as it is to human life because we have been made in the image of God and God is a musical being, a singing being.

They sing a “new” song. “New” is a very important word in the Bible and in Revelation. We read of new songs often in the book of Psalms, songs in which the grace and power of God are celebrated because God’s grace and power makes old, dying and ruined things *new*! Things that are “new” are, in the Bible, always connected with salvation and the grace of God. We will hear in Revelation of the *New* Jerusalem, the *new* heaven, the *new* earth all wonderful things that God’s grace brings to pass.

The song opens with the same words sung of God at the end of chapter 1. Once again we encounter the high Christology of Revelation. “The Lamb shares the worth of God and therefore is due the same worship due to God.” [Caird, 76]

In v. 9, a very important verse, the effectuality of Christ’s redeeming work is described by saying that he purchased men for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation. This is everywhere the perspective of the Bible. Christ’s redeeming work is effective; it accomplishes its ends; it does not wait upon the meeting of some further condition to gain its ends. Men believe and repent and follow Jesus in obedience *because they have been redeemed* by him. They have been bought and paid for and belong to him! And so certain is the eventual consummation of their salvation – these whom Christ has redeemed by his shed blood, that is, by his sacrificial death – that all of the opposition of the world, the flesh, and the devil cannot prevent it. That is the theme of the scroll, the scroll that the *Lamb* who appeared to have been slain is now holding in his hand.

- v.10 That the saints have been made into a kingdom and priests is an important theme in Revelation. Already mentioned in chapter 1, v. 6, it will be mentioned again in 20:6: “They shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years.”

In the verses that follow the song is amplified, first by a greater host of angels, and then by all creation, bearing witness to the Jesus Christ's universal lordship and sovereignty.

I want you to understand and appreciate that from the very beginning of the Christian era there has been waged an intellectual and spiritual war over Christianity's philosophy of history. There is a sense in which it may very well be said that the entire challenge of the Christian faith rests in its understanding of how events in the past inevitably and inexorably lead to a conclusion, a terminus in the future. For every human being life is going somewhere. Time is going to deliver us all to a particular destination and that destination is the return of the King of Kings, the Lord Jesus Christ. And at that destination all human beings will face the judgment and salvation forever will be granted those who have trusted in the Lord Jesus. This is the Christian philosophy of history. History is going somewhere and that somewhere is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the last judgment, heaven and hell. Celsus, the pagan thinker, attacked the Christian understanding of history in the 2nd century and was answered by Origen in the third century. Porphyry, the pagan writer, then attacked Origen's understanding and so on.

From Constantine onwards the emperors of the Roman world with one notable exception professed Christianity with its understanding of history, of time, and the future, but many of the aristocrats of that world, the wealthy landowners, together with the peasants who served them, remained devoted to the polytheistic religion of Rome's past. That religion had no real doctrine of the future and it had no real philosophy of history. Things continued and would continue as they always had. Ups and downs and cycles notwithstanding, history wasn't really going anywhere at all. It did not have a terminus. The past was not related to the future in terms of some purpose, cause and plan. Now most of these people didn't actually believe the old myths – they had long been mocked in the theater and critiqued by the philosophers – but the old rites were still observed as a means of keeping unseen powers favorably disposed and evil forces somehow at bay. When disaster struck in August of the year 410, when Alaric and his Goths sacked Rome, the intellectual warfare or the pagan and Christian philosophy of history flared up again, the pagans blaming the Christians for the catastrophe that had overtaken the world. [H. Chadwick, *Augustine*, 96-97]

Into the lists came the incomparable Augustine, a scholar and Christian bishop respected by both believers and unbelievers alike. The book he wrote in defense of a Christian understanding of history, *The City of God*, took him thirteen years to complete and is without question his magnum opus. Begun when he was 59, it was not finished until he was 72. It was published in sections over that time and contained, when finished, twenty-two large books or sections. The first ten books were a lengthy and punishing dismantling of the claims of both traditional Roman polytheism and of Greco-Roman philosophy. In the last twelve books Augustine developed the Christian understanding of history from the materials furnished in Holy Scripture. *The City of God* is, without question, one of the few among history's greatest books.

In it Augustine interpreted the course of human history as an unceasing conflict between two dynamic principles embodied in two societies and two social orders and only two – the City of Man and the City of God, Babylon and Jerusalem, which run their course side by side, intermingling with one another to be sure and sharing the same temporal goods and evils, but separated from one another by a vast spiritual gulf or chasm.

Is that not the history of the world and is that not its prospect until the last day when the City of God will be finally revealed and vindicated? Everywhere we look, in past and present, we see the human race apart from God and his grace seeking to erect its towers of Babel and every one of them tumbling down sooner or later under the weight of human greed and foolishness. But all along the way we can also trace the building of the City of God in human history. That city too prospers and decays, but always it is building, always the kingdom is moving forward in some way, as the Lord promised it would, and is the only religious and spiritual kingdom that began at the very beginning of the world and is still in existence today. All the other spiritual kingdoms having come and gone and always the gates of hell, sometimes despite appearances, are failing to prevail against the kingdom of God. As Theodore Beza said to the King of France in the days of the Reformation, “Sire, it belongs in truth to the church of God, in the name of which I speak, to receive blows and to give them, but it will please your Majesty to take notice that it is an anvil that has worn out many hammers.” And here we are 1600 years later and the story is the same, the pretensions, that nobody really believes are going to bring in a kingdom of peace and love and harmony, of the City of Man and the presence within it of an immense and growing City of God and the conflict between the two.

Crucial to Augustine’s understanding of history was the conviction that history can only be understood in terms of the great facts of biblical revelation. Much of what happens in the world cannot be easily explained. Empires and peoples rise and fall and the reason for a particular fall at a particular time is anything but clear. But that history is headed toward a goal and that God has it firmly under his control are the operative facts. Meantime history is forever bearing witness to the power and the goodness of God, to the principles of human sin and divine judgment – everywhere we look we see human beings sinning and being punished for their sin – and bearing witness to the reality of divine grace and the transformation of human life through faith in Jesus Christ. History, in other words, is constantly anticipating the final judgment and the eternal salvation of those who are in Jesus Christ. At the center of history stands and will forever stand the facts of the incarnation, the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ – facts of history that transcend all others and make all of history a story about Jesus Christ and his kingdom. It is only in view of these things that anyone can understand history at all.

For most of this time in the Western world, Augustine’s Christian understanding of history as having a divinely ordained goal inseparable from the redemptive plan of God in Jesus Christ and Christ’s work on the cross has exercised a powerful influence over Western thought. [Ladd, 82] Even when Western thinkers were not necessarily Christians they were still operating in the context of a view of history as having an aim, a purpose, and an end that was in fact a program that had already been written in the Divine Mind. But as the Western world has lost its grip on Christian truth and the authority of the Bible, the meaning of history has increasingly become a problem. Many more thinkers nowadays are likely to think and say that the entire question of the meaning of history has become meaningless.

Like the stubborn pagans of the Greco-Roman world of Augustine’s time, some have turned back to the old way of thinking. We have thinkers and popular writers nowadays urging us to reconnect with the teaching of ancient paganism and its spirituality. Most of the time, of course,

they are highly selective in recommending that pagan viewpoint to modern 21st century people. Other scholars have to point out – as Augustine did in his day – how much that is offensive and ridiculous is found in these philosophies and these ancient spiritualities. For example, Christian Gnosticism is being recommended to us in a number of quarters as a more attractive and acceptable form of Christianity for early twenty-first century people by scholars such as Princeton’s Elaine Pagels and popular writers such as Dan Brown. They like the “find salvation within yourself” idea that was a key feature of second and third century Gnosticism, even in its Christian form. They are not, however, in our modern age, likely to read out to you the last verse of one of Christian Gnosticism’s greatest texts, *The Gospel of Thomas*:

“Simon Peter said to them: Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life. Jesus said, Lo, I shall lead her, so that I may make her a male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven.” [114]

In fact the view of human life enshrined in that verse of *The Gospel of Thomas* is as fully central to Gnosticism as its summons to find salvation in a secret knowledge that can be discovered only within oneself.

Others, the more sophisticated thinkers in general, are materialists, that is they believe that the only thing that exists is matter – chemistry, biology, geology, physics – and, deeply influenced by Darwinian evolution and the scientific understanding of reality that it is supposed to have spawned, they have no theory of human history and of human affairs at all apart from what mindless changes may occur as evolution continues and as man the animal follows his own biology to felicity or ruin, the latter being far more likely than the former. One may be able to discern a few things about the past but one can know nothing about the future. What is more, to speak about *the meaning* of history is a category mistake, an exercise in incoherence. What can be said about the meaning of something that is inherently meaningless? William Provine, a biologist and Cornell University professor, speaks for this large community of thinkers who populate American and European colleges and universities:

“Modern science directly implies that the world is organized strictly in accordance with mechanistic [that is impersonal] principles. There are no purposive principles whatsoever in nature. There are no gods and no designing forces that are rationally detectable....

Second, modern science directly implies that there are no inherent moral or ethical laws, no absolute guiding principles for human society.

Third, human beings are marvelously complex machines. The individual human becomes an ethical person by means of two primary mechanisms: heredity and environmental influences. That is all there is.

Fourth, we must conclude that when we die, we die and that is the end of us.... [Cited in Johnson, *Darwin on Trial*, 126-127]

That is, whatever happens might have been something, anything else. And nothing *means* anything at all if by “means” you mean that it has some moral or spiritual or lasting significance. Right and wrong, happiness and grief, are simply biological and chemical states. They don’t *mean* anything at all; any more than an upset stomach or an itch *means* something.

Let me remind you that, of course, science hasn’t proved, hasn’t begun to prove any of those conclusions. They are Professor Provine’s religious convictions, not the conclusions of his science however he may confuse the two. Indeed, what Prof. Provine is asking us to do is to deny the deepest and most certain convictions that we have as human beings, that all human beings have. Love, justice, goodness, evil, and injustice: these are *real things* not just how our bodies happen *to feel* at any particular moment. Nevertheless, many people in our Western world hold these views about history and its meaninglessness however little they live by them. And in between the new welter of various neo-spiritualisms and atheistic naturalism are found great multitudes of people in our country and our culture who think very little about any of this and whose own view of history, if you could somehow extract it from their minds, would be a muddled mixture of tradition, sentiment, wishful thinking, and nose-counting.

What is happening in the world? Is history going anywhere? Does it mean anything? Why the two world wars and the communist revolution and debacle of the 20th century? Why the new struggle between the West and Islam? Why the fall of the Soviet Union? Why the rise of China? Why economic crises and political developments of every kind all around the world? Why does technological development bring as much misery as joy and as much corruption as goodness? Is there such a thing as true progress? And, what is more, why do individual lives take the particular shape that they do? Why are some babies born deformed? Why are some people rich and others poor? Why are some healthy and others sick? Why do some succeed – including people about whom there is little to admire – and others, including people who are very admirable, why do they fail? Why do some lives seem to achieve true fulfillment while others are marked by unending frustration? And a thousand more questions just like those. Where is history going? What does it mean? What is the end and purpose of what happens whether on the small scale of an individual human life or the large scale of the entire world?

Well, the Bible is emphatic in teaching us that we will not be able to answer most of these questions. Why particular empires rise and fall and why a particular life has the history that it does: these things are not revealed. John’s visions recorded in Revelation are not going to answer questions of that type beyond explaining certain patterns that are discernible always and everywhere in the life of mankind. There is, for example, an immense amount of suffering, as is inevitable in a world that is in rebellion against God, a world that is subject to his just condemnation and justice, and in which suffering in the hands of a gracious heavenly father sometimes is the only occasion of or the only instrument to produce eternally important things in the life of a human being. As we will be reminded in the next chapter, the history of the world is a history of tumult, disaster, war, famine, and death. What we know about all of this is that it is only to be expected in such a world of sin, judgment, and redemption. As Augustine put it in one of his letters, the troubles of life may move us to tears, but they should not provoke surprise, still less astonishment. This world is predictably in turmoil precisely because it is in rebellion against God, precisely because a great contest is being waged over it by the forces of darkness and light and because God is at work in it to rescue human life. [CXI, 2] But in regard to the *whys* and

wherefores of human life even the very best and deepest thinking Christian is left groping in the dark. We are but creatures; we cannot know the mind of Almighty God.

But the *what* of human life and human history is a very different matter. What is history? It is a divine plot. It is a story written in heaven before it happens on earth. It is the outworking of God's purpose for the world, for mankind, and for every human being. It is the context of the manifestation of God's redeeming love and of his holy justice. It is the prelude to the consummation of love and justice in eternal heaven and eternal hell. It is the great drama of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. *That* is what we are being shown and told here in chapter 5. *That* is the meaning of the scroll sealed seven times, of the Lamb who was slain taking the scroll from the hand of God, and that is the meaning of the thrilling worship of the Lamb by the great hosts of heaven. They see what all of this means and what wonder, comfort, encouragement and joy it must be to the saints to know that all that will transpire in the world is the will of their God and Savior.

The history that is reported in Holy Scripture, from the moment of creation itself to the end of the first century when Revelation was written, is given an authoritative interpretation and that is what is said about it. It was God's plan and purpose that was being unfolded, the central event of which was the revelation of God's Son, Jesus Christ and his work as the world's redeemer, and that same plan is now inexorably moving to its consummation at the end of the age when all will be revealed.

What is more, in a highly interesting and important way, that biblical history intersects again and again with what we might naively refer to as the ordinary history of the world. We encounter nations and kings and battles and cities that are known from other sources than the Bible. We encounter figures who would be known to human history if there were no Bible, from Noah to David to Alexander the Great to Pontius Pilate and Domitian, the Roman emperor of the time of the writing of Revelation. The one history is part and parcel of the other. There are not two histories – one sacred and one secular – but one, as Augustine said, two cities intermingled with one another making their progress to that end and destination that God has appointed for each. God is as much in charge of Babylon's rise and fall as Jerusalem's rise and fall. He as surely lies behind the disappearance of the ancient gods – Aton and Marduk and Baal – as he lies behind the world-wide worship of Jesus Christ in our own day.

History is supercharged with significance precisely because it is the outworking of a divinely written script. In human history we encounter God's mind and God's will. We may only see the periphery, the outskirts of that divine mind and divine will but the fact that it is God's mind and will that is being worked out in history is its central fact and meaning. Modern people often don't think that way. Henry Ford, in an interview published in the *Chicago Tribune* once said,

“History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today.” [*Little Brown Book of Anecdotes*, 213]

That is the naïve view of most people. History does not matter. But that is not the Bible's viewpoint. Everything about your life and everything about the life of this world at this moment

depends *absolutely* on what has happened in the past in the life and death and resurrection of God's Son and what will come to pass in the future at his coming again. History is the will of God and all of it, down to the smallest detail, existed first in God's mind before it ever happened in the world. And Jesus Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb who was slain, alone has the power and the authority to rule that history and to bring it to its appointed end. *Without him* there is no meaning, no goal, no purpose; just a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. *With him* there is a certain fulfillment, a glorious conclusion, a triumph, a moral, just, and right consummation for every human being that has ever lived in the world and for the entire world as a whole.

That is why vast hosts in heaven are singing a new song to God and about the Lord Jesus Christ, why they are falling on their faces before him, and why Christians through the ages, in even the darkest of days, have known for a certainty that what happens to them as a part of what is happening in their world, in their time, is precisely what is supposed to happen, precisely what was written down as going to happen before the world ever was. Everything is part of the story that God has written, everything circles around the Lamb, and everything will end at that throne, with vast multitudes of men and angels bowing before it singing new songs.