

TRINITY 2A - Bible Study

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 March 2004

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] O God our Father, you invite us into heaven to see your throne room, the control room of the universe through the eyes of John who recorded this vision for our benefit and for our training in righteousness. We come with trembling into your presence as we see the heart of the universe and the key of history and eternity before our eyes. Fill our hearts with faith, with awe and with praise that our lives on earth may reflect the glory of the one who opens the scroll. Amen. In effect today's passage is part two of a two-part little series on Revelation chapters four and five. It's the counterpart of what we looked at last night that is. Well last night we saw the setting of the throne room of God and the heavenly host singing the praises of God, an unceasing adoration and praise of God the creator and God the sustainer or provider. An endless and unceasing though that worship is as we saw last night. Heaven's worship in chapter four is at one level still deficient because into this symphony of praise and glory and blessing comes now decisive drama that leads to the fullness of praise and blessing of God. Into what last night in one sense is a collage that builds on and brings out of the old testament all sorts of imagery to encourage us to persevere. Into tonight's passage in the same place comes if you like the drama and action of the new testament. Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back sealed with seven seals. A scroll typical of writing in those days very few books as we would have it. A scroll that would be wound up and down writing usually on one side only unless somebody was too poor to buy another scroll so use the back which is always more awkward for writing or if it was a legal document often written on both sides. What is this closed scroll? One of the dangers in reading what is called apocalyptic literature such as the book of revelation some of the intertestamental literature part of the book of Daniel Zechariah in the old testament is that we can lose control in our use of analogies and identification of the various things and symbols that we find in it. That's a bad reading. We aren't actually given a free for all to say what we think that such and such might identify or refer to or mean because the keys are actually relatively clear.

Through the old testament the fundamental key to understanding the symbolism and the things that are happening derives from the old testament. Our problem is that we don't know the old testament as well perhaps as the original readers and certainly as well as the apostle John. But in the old testament in Ezekiel in the book of Daniel two of the prophets from the time of the exile around about 550 years before Jesus and a bit over 600 years before this book we find there a scroll written on both sides in Ezekiel very unusual a scroll that is sealed in Daniel but a scroll which it is clear from those books contains the purposes of God for judgment and salvation for this universe and that's the imagery from which this picture comes. Here we find a closed scroll in the hand of God sealed with seven seals not unlike some of the Roman emperors of Spasian Augustus whose own wills were sealed with seven seals apparently. This is God's will God's purpose if you like for eternity for judgment and for salvation.

This scroll contains within it the foundation for the rest of the book of revelation. Not just that but the opening of it will bring about the fulfillment of the events described on the scroll.

Sluicing its seals will bring into being the purposes of God for this universe for eternity the creation which God has made. In Daniel chapter 12 the scroll is to be kept sealed. It's not yet time in Daniel chapter 12 for the scroll to be opened until the end. And so in a sense this scroll has been kept bound like a time capsule in one sense awaiting the time for its opening. Now in one sense historically it's already been opened by the time that John lived but the drama of the book of Revelation is helping us to understand the events preceding John as well as the events of his day and the days to come. The drama is who will open the scroll and so verse 2 asks the question from the lips of a mighty angel. Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals? Who is worthy? In chapter 4 God is worthy.

In chapter 4 verse 9 God was thrice holy in the acclamation of praise to him. And we saw in the whole of chapter 4 yesterday that the worthiness or worship of God meant the bowing down of all of the created order angelic beings included before and around his throne. This awesome holy other separate God. Who then is worthy? Who is worthy to cross the glassy sea, to pass the angels, to approach God's throne and to take from his very right hand this sealed scroll? Who is worthy? Who can qualify? Who can approach a God before whom even the highest of the angels cover their eyes and bow down in worship? Who is worthy? Not who is powerful but who is worthy? It's in fact a mighty or a powerful angel who's asked that and if might or power were what was required for somebody to open the scroll then maybe that angel is mighty enough to do that task but no. Worthiness is not physical might but moral strength. Worthy implies worthy, worship or worship as we saw in the previous chapter. The mighty angel asks who is worthy? No hands are put up in heaven. No one shouts out from the back row even like a naughty teenager. Well I'll do it miss. There's silence in effect. Who is worthy and no one owns up but they know. The people of heaven, the angels of heaven, the living creatures of heaven know that they are not worthy enough to open this scroll. No one is worthy and John weeps as a result. I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. John's not just being a hyper emotional sort of weeping person here. He knows that this scroll is the purposes of God. He knows that if this scroll is not open then God's purposes come to naught and so he weeps and cries. God's purposes depend on someone worthy enough opening this scroll. So if God is to be is to triumph the scroll must be opened and the dilemma is that God's purposes to be frustrated after all.

[6 : 27] For down on earth remember where John has come from, where his people have come from, in the churches of Ephesus and Laodicea and Pergamum in Asia Minor in the latter part of the first century AD under Roman persecution. They're struggling. They're facing opposition and perhaps many of them are doubting whether the purposes of God as they understand them will actually be fulfilled or whether the might of Rome will prevail and stamp out and squash out the worshipping community of the people of God.

And John weeps but it's not the end of the story thankfully. For in verse 5 he is told by one of the elders, do not weep, see the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David has conquered so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals. See how this person who is to open the scroll is so rooted in the Old Testament. The lion of Judah, Judah the prevailing tribe of the tribes of the people of Israel through the Old Testament. The one tribe more or less that survived through the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians and even the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians subsequent to that. This is the one looking back from and anticipated in the Old Testament as early as the book of Genesis in effect and he's the root of David. Descended from David but more than that the root of David is predecessor as much as his successor or descendant. Again it's Old Testament language.

David the great and archetypal king of the people of God who'd come from the tribe of Judah born in Bethlehem. This one is not just a descendant but indeed his source, his lord. Use the language of one of the Psalms. Literally the elder says to John here in verse 5, Behold, he has triumphed. The lion of the tribe of Judah. That is the emphasis is on the fact that he has triumphed. He's overcome in other translations. It's emphatic, it's decisive, it's acclamatory.

He's won as though and the language picks up the sense that there's been a long, a difficult, a hard struggle that he's prevailed. He's overcome, he's triumphed and so it's a shout of triumph, a shout of joy, a shout of praise that this elder says to John. There's no object of what he's defeated which may well imply that it's really an absolute victory. It's not he's triumphed over this or that or the other. It's just he's triumphed implying in effect a total victory and the language is definitely past tense and aorist tense. So the past battle's been fought and it's won already. The book of Revelation is not about a battle to be fought and won yet. It's about the aftermath of a battle that's been won. It's been won by the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David already. And the purpose of his triumph, as the end of verse 5 says, is so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals. That is why he triumphed was in order to open a scroll. That is he triumphed in order to bring about the fulfillment of the purposes of God for this universe and for eternity. That's why he triumphed, for the purposes of God to be fulfilled. And throughout this letter, this book of Revelation, including in the opening three chapters, the letters specifically to each of the seven churches, but in other places later too in this book, there is the exhortation to overcome. To overcome is to overcome in the one who has already overcome and triumphed. The lion of the tribe of Judah. He has triumphed and we overcome or triumph in him. Well, John hears this great announcement from the elder.

He hears a lion of the tribe of Judah. Now he looks. He follows the instruction of the elder. And he looks perhaps around to find the lion. But we're told surprisingly in verse 6, then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, a lamb, not a lion. It's a lamb that comes in effect from the throne of God. You know, until today, I hadn't quite realized this. I pictured myself standing in this vast auditorium of the throne room of God, surveying at a distance, the throne of God with the living creatures and the elders and the glass he see before me, as though somehow I would turn around and from behind me would be the lamb. But the lamb comes from the very throne of God with the living creatures between the throne and the living creatures, not from the back, from the distance or from out of the throne room, but he comes from the very throne of God himself. And this is an odd thing, but the elder says, see the lion and John sees a lamb. Has John got it wrong or the elder got it wrong? It's actually one of the functions or features, if you like, of this sort of writing. And through the book of Revelation, you see it in a number of cases where something is said, but what is seen that correlates to that is described very differently. The words, a lion, but you look and you see a lamb. In chapter 7, there is the multitude that no one can number. And then there are the 144,000. It's the same group of people described in different ways. And so here, the lion and the lamb is one. Because one of the things that the book of Revelation is trying to do is to help Christians on earth in the midst of persecution know that God reigns, not Caesar. And you see, despite appearances on earth, the reality is God reigns. And one of the ways in which that idea is conveyed is that the announcement of a lion, but the appearance of a lamb. That is a lamb that looks slain. You might say like a Sunday roast, a weak thing, a pathetic thing. And yet the appearance might look pathetic and weak and defeated. But the reality is it's a lion. So you don't judge by appearance. And so on earth, if you're persecuted, don't judge by appearance and think that the Roman empire is going to prevail and stamp out the Christian faith that God has somehow abandoned his people or too weak or that

[11 : 54] Caesar, Domitian or Nero or whoever is more powerful than God. Not at all. Don't judge by appearances on earth. The reality comes from the throne room of heaven. The lamb is in fact the lion. Appearances can be deceptive. It's in effect the pastoral implication that's being made here.

And this lamb is as if it was slain, sacrificed, not just killed, but the sense of slain is sacrificed deliberately, purposely. This is the lamb of Isaiah 53. It's the lamb of the world, the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, but standing because it's alive, no longer dead. You see, a lamb that was slain, but standing brings together the cross and the resurrection in the one picture. That's his death that makes him worthy. Not his great teaching or healing or miracles. It's his death that makes him worthy to open the scroll. I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns, symbols of strength and power, and seven eyes, symbols of knowledge. Seven being a perfect number, there is perfect power and perfect knowledge. Theological terms are omnipotent and omniscient. Thus is this lamb. The lamb went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. Here is a lamb that looks weak, but is indeed strong. A warning to us not to look in the wrong place for strength in Christian churches, ministry, gospels, or Christians.

Strength comes from a sacrificed lamb. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell before the lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. That's how worthy he is that the highest of the angelic beings of heaven worship the lamb and bow down before the lamb. As they bow down to the one who sits on the throne, so do they bow down before the lamb, equally to be worshipped. As fully worshipped as God on his throne is the worship of the lamb in heaven. There is no place or a second rung on the ladder for the lamb in our scale of worship or scale of importance. God the father, God the son, to use other language, equally to be worshipped. And before him were taken the harps, harps of joy and praise that is, but also the bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. Because what this is representing symbolically is that now the scroll is being opened because the lamb has died and risen.

Prayers can be offered and answered because our prayers go to the throne of God through his son, the lamb, who died and rose and ascended to this very throne room. Prayers work because Jesus died. There is a huge encouragement for Christians on earth, Christians facing struggle, persecution and difficulty. Pray because prayers work because the lamb has taken the scroll in the right hand of the one on the throne. And now a new song throughout the Psalms, in particular in the Old Testament, when the people of God are exhorted to sing a new song to the Lord, it's because the Lord has won some decisive victory. Sing a new song here, we're told at the beginning of verse 9.

Song in praise of a victory won, the triumph of the lamb. You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God and they will reign on earth. A new song added to the song that we saw last night in Revelation chapter 4.

[15:08] A song now addressed to the lamb. In the words addressed to God on the throne yesterday, you are worthy. Jesus, a lamb, worthy and therefore worshipped as God was in chapter 4. And in particular the praise of the lamb is a praise for him dying. You are worthy because you were slaughtered.

Not just because he was slaughtered like any other lamb, but because his particular sacrificial death had a specific purpose by God. That is to ransom for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation. That is his blood, his death bought people for God. Not that people are saved by the death of the lamb for whatever else, for whatever they want to do. It's not a Christian freedom to live for yourself, that's actually sin. We're actually bought to live for God. God has bought us by the blood of his willing son, the lamb who died for us. And notice that these are saints from every tribe and language and people and nation. There's absolutely no place in the Christian church for any hint or inkling of racism of any sort. It's not just restricted here to Jewish people descended racially from Abraham, but every tribe and language and nation. Those people are bought. Without any distinction is the sense of those words at the end of verse 9. And the lamb's death in a sense fulfills the original mandate for which human beings, you and I, were created. Back in Genesis 1, humankind, male and female, made in the image of God to exercise dominion over the world in a mediatorial role and in a kingly role with dominion over the world. That particular role, given the failure of humanity to fulfill that, was then ascribed to the people of God later in the Old Testament at Mount Sinai, when God in a sense inaugurated the people of God as the nation of Israel and told them that they were a royal priesthood. A regal role to have dominion, a priestly role to mediate to the world, just as humanity was originally created for. A role and function and title, if you like, that was deliberately passed on to the people of God in the New Testament, now no longer restricted to the race of Israel, but to believers in the Lord Jesus Christ of whatever race. So the very language of Mount Sinai is applied to Christians in 1 Peter chapter 2. A royal priesthood. And here the same sort of idea.

A kingdom and priests serving our God. Why God made humans. And here is that original mandate being fulfilled through the death of the Lamb. This is a heavenly vision for an earthly purpose.

It is encouragement for struggling Christians. In Asia Minor, in particular, in the Roman Empire, they are to reign and mediate even on earth by the power of the blood of the Lamb. May not look at in the face of the might of the Roman Empire of the day, whether Nero or Domitian, but that is their role. And the earthly purpose of this heavenly vision is to encourage such Christians to fulfill their function on earth. But the song of heaven in praise of the Lamb doesn't stop just here with the living creatures and the elders. We're then told that the rest of the angels get in on the act.

There's a build-up of crescendo going on in this chapter. Then I looked and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders. And they numbered myriads of myriads, literally 10,000s of 10,000s, as indeed we sang in the first hymn tonight. And thousands of thousands. And they're singing with full voice. They're not restrained. They're not Anglican, you see. They are singing lustily the praise of the Lamb.

[18:26] Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. A sevenfold ascription of praise to the Lamb. Four things that in a sense belong inherently to Him. Power, wealth, wisdom, might. Three things that show the subjective ascription of praise to Him. Honour, glory and blessing. Seven attributes in praise of the Lamb. Don't ever think that somehow the worship of the Lamb plays second fiddle to the worship of the one on the throne.

Because last night only three attributes were in the praise of God on the throne. Here is the fulsome praise of the Lamb by comparison. It doesn't stop there either. We've had the living creatures and the elders sing a song. Then the angels, myriads and myriads of angels joining in the crescendo.

And now John hears in verse 13, every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them, there's nothing left singing to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb equally blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever. There's the climax of the praise of heaven. Praise of the creator sustainer, but above all praise of the redeemer, the Lamb who was slain for us. And the four living creatures in response to this huge orchestra, a choir of praise, say Amen. Literally so be it. It's true. We agree. And the elders fell down and worshipped. All the academic theology in the world, whether it's about the doctrine of the Trinity, the atonement, salvation, ecclesiology, eschatology, all the academic theology in the world is nothing if it's not in praise, if Jesus is not worshipped, if the Lamb is not praised. The same throne of God is the throne of the Lamb. And his worth is because of the cross. A death that looks so impotent, weak and foolish in the eyes of our world as in the eyes of John's Roman world, but indeed is powerful enough to win or ransom lives of every nation for God. And all the purposes of God, our future, the end days when they come, our eternal destiny in heaven, the key to the whole kit and caboodle from beginning to end and beyond is the Lamb who was slain. It's the key to understanding what God is on about, where you and I are destined, where we've come from, why we're made, where we're heading, the reason for this whole universe and the heavens and the new earth to come. The centre of it all is the Lamb who was slain. A decisive and eternal victory on a cross outside Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago, but a victory worthy of endless praise. You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals. For you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God and they will reign on earth. Amen.