

The message of comfort for the people of God during this pandemic is the same as it was last week and the week before and the week before that. God is in control. God works everything together for the good of his people. We should not be surprised if suffering comes our way. Suffering does not mean that God no longer loves us. And what is waiting for us beyond this life is more wonderful than we can even imagine. The basic message does not change.

But God has given us the whole Bible so that we can look at the basic message from a wide variety of perspectives. It would have been possible for God to give us a very short Bible with everything we need to know listed in point form with complete precision, but something vital would be missing and that is the great variety that we have in the Bible as we have it. God has given us a book that is rich in its variety of literature and ideas and imagery to convey a message that is both simple in its basic outline and rich and diverse in the variety of ways that that message is conveyed. And so we have it, in the chapter we are going to look at this morning. The message is basically the same as the message of chapter 4 which we looked at last week. God is in control. The most significant thing in the universe is the worship of God. That message is hugely significant for us as we face this pandemic which has so profoundly altered our lives, and which has made our immediate future so uncertain.

But in chapter 5 that message comes to us in a way that adds a great deal for us to imagine and dwell on. Again it is highly symbolic which means that there is lots for us to imagine. It paints a picture that we can take with us and dwell on as we face both the present and the future. In one sense there is nothing new – in terms of the basic message. In another sense it is all new because the message is conveyed in a new way that adds depth and freshness to the message.

So John, the human writer of the book, has been invited into heaven. It doesn't matter how it happened. What matters is that John saw into heaven and wrote down what he saw so that we can read his words and see what he saw in our imaginations. By means of John's words we are given the gift of seeing what he saw. There is a sense in which we are right there with him.

Verse 1, "Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals." Now all of the different facets of this vision are rooted in the OT. I'm not going to spend a lot of time making those connections because I want to keep things as simple as possible. We will try as much as possible just to think carefully about what we read and see and pick up what is obvious.

The scroll in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne is a key part of this chapter and the rest of the book of Revelation.

The simplest way of understanding what was on the scroll is to take note of what happens when the scroll is unrolled in the rest of the book of Revelation. The rest of the book of Revelation tells us what happens as the scroll is unrolled right to the end of history and the new heavens and the new earth. The scroll then has

written on it what is going to happen between John's time and the end of the world. And what we see in the rest of the book of Revelation is that the things that are written on the scroll actually happen on earth as the seals of the scroll are opened.

Quite clearly then, the scroll is the plan of God for the world from John's time right to the end. It is very significant that what is written on the scroll actually takes place as the seals are opened.

Now to a much lesser extent that even happens on earth. In the current crisis, various authorities come up with plans and because of their authority those plans are implemented. So Prime-minister Trudeau says that the government has planned to shut the Canada-US border to all unessential traffic and at the appointed time that happens. Even on earth many of the plans of authorities come to pass.

That is true of God's plan but in a much greater and grander way because of who God is and because of the fact that his authority is absolute, and his power is infinite. What is written on that scroll is going to happen. That what is written on the scroll is going to happen is the most absolutely certain reality, period.

But there is a problem. And that problem is described in verses 2-4, "And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals? And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.'"

Now this is very interesting. The great question we must ask is, "Why doesn't God just open the scroll himself? God is seated on the throne. The scroll is in his right hand. Why does God not just break the seals and open the scroll himself? The reason must be within God himself. There is no one bigger than God who can stop him from opening the scroll. The reason that God does not open the scroll himself must be within God himself.

From what the angel says, it is clear that someone other than the one sitting on the throne must open the scroll if it is going to be opened and that someone must somehow be worthy to open it. And it did not appear to John that there was anyone worthy to open the scroll and that was a great catastrophe. John says, "[A]nd I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it."

Why was it so sad that no one was able to open the scroll? Well think of what was written on the scroll - which is what we learn from the rest of the book of Revelation. There are two main things that happen in the rest of the book of Revelation. God brings about the new heavens and the earth while defeating the forces of evil. The rest of the book of Revelation has a lot to say about the defeat of evil which includes Satan and his hosts and the followers of Satan who refuse to repent. But that is not all that there is in the rest of the book of Revelation. There are people who are delivered from sin and death and Satan. There is the great multitude that no one could number standing before the throne who sing, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And there is finally the renewal of all things at the end of history.

That is all on the scroll. And that is why John weeps when he believes that no one was able to open and unroll the scroll. If the scroll is not unrolled, what will not happen is the combination of the defeat of the wicked and the salvation of the people of God and the whole creation.

Now presumably if no one was found who was worthy to unroll the scroll, in the end God would just throw everyone into the lake of fire, but the book of Revelation does not speculate on that.

The point is that without someone to open the scroll, God's original plan for the creation will not be fulfilled. What God intended when he created is a beautiful story of mankind living to the glory of God, enjoying fullness of life to the glory of God and filling the creation with the glory of God by filling the creation with God-glorifiers. If the scroll of Revelation 5 is never unrolled, that beautiful plan will never be realized. That would mean that Satan had won, in a sense, because he would have kept God's plan for his glory and man's flourishing, by glorifying God, from being realized.

So John was weeping because he did not at first see anyone who was worthy to open the scroll and if the scroll was not opened and what was written on it fulfilled, God's plan for the defeat of evil and the renewal of his creation would not be fulfilled. No wonder John wept!

Now the fact that someone worthy was necessary to open the scroll and that God himself was not going to open the scroll, meant that what was needed was a worthy human being. If we look at the storyline of the Bible, it is clear that God created mankind as the instrument through whom he would fulfill his purposes for the creation. Think of Adam and Eve and the calling that God had given them to have dominion over the earth. It was clearly the plan of God to accomplish his purposes for the creation through them. But they proved not to be worthy. They fell into sin. Then there is Abraham and his seed. God chose them out of all the families of the earth to be his people and through them to bless all the families of the earth. But they had proved unworthy as well. The assumption in these verses that speak about no one being worthy to open to scroll is that God's plan for his creation involves human beings as the instruments to fulfill his purpose for the creation. What was needed was a human being who was worthy to open the scroll and be the agent through whom God would fulfill his purposes for creation – God being glorified through human beings who would serve him through life in the creation.

At first John did not see such a man, and that is why he wept so loudly. Without a worthy human being God's plan for his creation would never be realized. But then we come to the solution. Verse 5 "And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'" This is a reference to the promised king of the line of David. I'll quickly mention two references. Genesis 49:9-11. Jacob's dying blessing to Judah, "Judah is a lion's cub The scepter shall not depart from Judah ... and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." So a promised king in the line of Judah, powerful like a lion, who would reign forever. And then Isaiah 11:1-5. I'll only read verse 1, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse...." This is the promise of a king in the line of

David and the rest of this chapter and many other places promise that he will bring salvation for his people and conquer all his and their enemies.

This is who verse 5 of Revelation 5 refers to: “Weep no more; behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David as conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” Here was a human being – a man – the promised Messiah of the line of David. He turns out to be more than a human being, but he needed to be a human being to be worthy to open the scroll. He had to conquer to open the scroll. And we are told that he had conquered so that he was able and worthy to open the scroll.

And look what happens next. I will read 6-10. Listen in the light of what we have been thinking. Revelation 5:6–10, “⁶And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, ¹⁰and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.””

Notice how John shifts from a Lion to a Lamb without hesitation even though he is talking about the same person – without noticing or caring that a Lion and a Lamb are two very different creatures. John doesn’t care that you can’t actually picture exactly what he is describing. He is conveying truth by each of the symbols. This worthy person is the promised saviour-king of Israel – an image of power and authority; but he is also “a Lamb standing as though it had been slain.” A lamb is very, very different from a king. A lamb is a sacrifice. A lamb is weak. And this Lamb has been sacrificed!

So, the worthy one was a King and a Lamb which had been slain but which is now obviously very much alive. And this Lamb is powerful. He has seven horns. Horns stand for power. Seven stands for completion and fullness. This Lamb is very very powerful. And he is associated with the Holy Spirit. He has “seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” He has the Holy Spirit without measure. He sees all. He is present through all the earth by means of the Spirit.

And this is the climax: Verse 7 “And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne.” This is the climax of this passage. And it is in many ways the climax of the Bible. The great problem that the Bible presents us with is that no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. No one was worthy to open the scroll. No one was worthy to fulfill the purposes of God for his creation. No one is worthy because all humans are sinners and so under the wrath of God. The good news on the scroll, of the defeat of evil and the victory of good and the fulfillment of God’s glorious purposes for his creation, is sealed with seven seals and no one is worthy to open those seals. That

dark prospect is the background for the glorious command ... “Weep no more.” It is against that darkness and hopelessness that we see the Lion/Lamb taking the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne.

This all means that Jesus Christ – the Son of David and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – is worthy and able to unroll the plan of God for the defeat of evil and the salvation of the creation. He has conquered that which stood in the way of the glorious intention of God for his creation – a wonderful place of harmony and fruitfulness in love between God and man and between human beings and harmony with the created order. The great problem was sin. And Jesus has conquered sin by his perfect life, by his sacrificial death and by his resurrection from the dead. And he is worthy and able to bring about the things that follow in the book of Revelation which is a description of history in symbolic form which leads to the goal of the plan of God in the destruction of evil and the salvation of sinners and the renewal of all things.

And notice what happens when the Lamb takes the “scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne.” What happens is worship. Verse 8, “And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints.” The four living creatures stand for the living beings on the earth. The twenty four elders stand for the all the people of God of Old and New Testament periods. And the response to the fact that the Lamb was worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals is worship.

The fact of worship means that the Lamb is divine as well as human. We have seen that he had to be human in order to be worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, but the fact of worship means that he is divine as well. It would be gross idolatry if the worship recorded in this chapter was directed to a mere human being.

Each of the twenty-four elders has a harp in his hand. Harps are used in worship to accompany singing. They are part of the picture of worship. The twenty-four elders are also holding “golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” If the twenty-four elders represent the entire church, the “golden bowls full of incense” represent the prayers of the church – including our prayers.

This gives us a way to visualize our prayers. This symbol makes it clear that our prayers make it into heaven. In some ways this picture of golden bowls of incense representing the prayers of the saints is similar to a sacrament in the sense that it gives us a way to visualize a spiritual reality. It is not a sacrament – I’m not suggesting that we add to the number of sacraments - but what I am saying is that this symbol of golden bowls full of incense enables us to visualize our prayers which is something that the sacraments also do with aspects of the gospel.

It is comforting to have this confirmation and visualization that our prayers are a reality in the throne room of God and the worship of the Lamb.

Verses 8-14 are all describing the worship in heaven and in this case the focus is the Lamb. Verse 9, “And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.’”

Notice the relationship between the fact that the Lamb was slain, and his blood shed, and his worthiness to take the scroll and to open its seals. The scroll and the opening of the seals represent the unfolding of the plan of God both in salvation and judgement on the unrepentant. That plan required the death of Jesus in order to be realized. That that death was required for the salvation of sinners is familiar to us, but that it was also required for the defeat of evil is maybe less familiar. But remember what Jesus said just before he went to the cross. John 12:31, Jesus says, “Now is the judgement of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.”

But the focus in the new song of worship to the Lamb here is on salvation. “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” The scroll contains God’s plan of salvation and the worthiness to open its seals included Jesus giving his life to pay the penalty for our sins.

The reason that the Lamb was worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals is that he ransomed people for God by the shedding of his blood. The reason that the plan of God is being realized in history under the direction of Jesus is that there is a people from every tribe and language and people and nation who are a kingdom and priests to God who will reign on the earth. God’s plan for the salvation of the world involves the renewal of the whole creation, but at the heart of that is the renewal of a people who will be a kingdom and priests to God. Priests worship and serve God in his temple. In the end the whole creation will be the temple of God. The priests will also reign on the earth. The people of God are priest-kings who worship and serve and reign to the glory of God which is what was God’s intention for his creation.

What is on the scroll is largely about them – about the people who are ransomed for God by the blood of the lamb. Ephesians 1:22 says that God put all things under Jesus feet and “gave him as head over all things to the church....” Peter O’Brian writes on this verse, “Christ’s dominion over the cosmos is for the benefit of believers....”

The church is at the center of the plan of God. What is written on the scroll is all about bringing the people of God to the culmination of their salvation. The scroll as lots to say about how God will judge the wicked and preserve his people through the hard-times. But the goal of what is written on the scroll is the new heavens and the new earth which features God dwelling with his people. Jesus is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals because he shed his blood to ransom a people for God. And everything written on that scroll has to do with bringing to its culmination the victory and salvation that he has accomplished by shedding his blood.

And all of that is the reason for all the worship in heaven that the last part of this chapter describes. Heaven is filled with praise to the Lamb because the Lamb is worthy to take the scroll of the salvation plan of God and to implement it to its goal. And all of heaven sings the praises of the Lamb because of that.

What a picture to carry with us in these days of uncertainty and unrest! What a comfort to consider what is going on all around the world in the light of the scroll which is in the hand of the Lamb. He is going to open its seals one by one. What is unleashed when the seals are opened will often involve suffering, but the saints are always preserved in their suffering and their great comfort in the suffering is in the fact that the scroll is in the hands of the Lamb who shed his blood for them.

Let us take with us the picture of the Lamb with the scroll in his hand and let us live through these times knowing that the seals are opened by that same Lamb who gave his blood for us and who by opening the seals is bringing history to its appointed end which will involve blessings more glorious than we have every known on this earth. And let us imitate what is going on in heaven by being caught up in the worship of the Lamb.