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Jesus: The Reigning Lion and Risen Lamb
Revelation 5:1-14

On April 13th, 1743, approximately one year after its composition by George Frederick Handel, what is perhaps *the most recognizable musical score in the world*, known as *The Messiah*, was performed in London, England. As the choir began to sing the majestic and now world-famous “Hallelujah Chorus,” King George II was so stirred that he rose to his feet. The audience spontaneously followed suit and remained standing until the chorus ended. If you’ve ever attended a performance of *The Messiah* or merely an occasion when the “Hallelujah Chorus” is sung, you know that this response of standing has been customary ever since.

The “Hallelujah Chorus” may well be the single most inspiring and spiritually charged composition of Christian worship ever written. So what moved Handel to write it? What inspired him? What had he seen or heard or felt that led him to compose this hymn of praise? *The Messiah* as a whole and the “Hallelujah Chorus” in particular were inspired by Handel’s meditation on the exalted and majestic portrait of the beauty of God in Revelation 4-5.

Handel’s early life was anything but tranquil. He was notoriously hot-tempered, frequently engaging in fights with other musicians. He hit an especially low point in 1741 at the age of 57. He was hopelessly in debt and was suffering from severe depression. One day a young poet named Charles Jennens appeared unannounced at his door. He delivered to Handel a collection of biblical passages under the title of *A Sacred Oratorio*. Half-heartedly, Handel began to read the manuscript. As he did, the prophetic utterance of Isaiah concerning the coming of Messiah began to lift him from his depression and reverberated in his soul: “Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace!”

As if by divine compulsion, Handel began to compose. He remained in virtual seclusion for the next twenty-five days, often going without food lest he be interrupted from his work. At times he would leap into the air, waving his hands, and shout “Hallelujah!” When it was done, he said: “I think I did see all heaven before me, and the Great God Himself.”

Revelation 4-5 is a vision of the majesty of a sovereign God in complete control of his creation. From an earthly perspective, it might seem that the enemies of the kingdom of God are winning. Some today are speaking of a virtual “Christian genocide” in certain parts of the world. Followers of Jesus are being persecuted, imprisoned, and martyred. It seems that we hear almost weekly of Christians in Egypt or in Syria or Iran being martyred by ISIS, often in indescribably sadistic and gruesome ways. Personal tragedies, economic chaos, and moral degradation are rampant in our society.

If one were to go strictly by external appearances, Satan seems to be winning.

But the Apostle John’s vision, recorded for us in Revelation 4-5, reveals that *appearances are remarkably deceiving!* The course of history isn’t determined by political intrigue or military might, but by God. The future isn’t ultimately in the hands of the next President of the U.S. Neither Democrats nor Republicans control the final outcome.

What the Apostle John discovered, what Handel also must have learned, is that *there are two worlds or two dimensions of reality*. One is earthly and visible, the other is heavenly and invisible. And *it is the heavenly/invisible world which controls and determines the earthly/visible*. Or better still, it is God who is sovereign over both!

It’s as if the Holy Spirit says to John (and to us): *“Listen to me. Things are not as they appear. I’m about to show you things as they really are. I’m about to take you into the throne room of God himself. Things aren’t running amok. The devil hasn’t won. Evil hasn’t triumphed. Neither fate nor cruel chance nor ISIS nor either one of your political parties there in the U.S. governs the universe. He who was and is and is to come has everything well in hand.”*

I wish we had time to closely read and meditate on what John records for us in Revelation 4, but we don’t. What I can tell you is that he is given a breathtaking, knee-knocking, heart-pounding, eye-popping vision of the Triune God. He

sees the Lord enthroned, encircled by an innumerable host of angels, and extolled and worshiped and adored by all of creation.

When we see God as he is, as John portrays him, incomparably sublime and incontestably sovereign, we will praise him as we should in unison with the heavenly hosts. This is not a pathetic weakling of a deity wringing his hands over a world catapulting into oblivion. He does not pace the floor of heaven with furrowed brow, riddled with anxiety over the outcome of human history. God reigns!

But is it *practical* to worship when the world is falling apart? John's life is at risk. Of all the apostles, he alone has survived. Who knows how much longer he has? In such a crisis, why would the Spirit escort John into heaven and point to the adoring and passionate praise of angels and odd creatures and saints? Because it's the only thing that makes sense! ***Worship is no flight from reality. Nothing is more real than what John sees and hears and senses around the throne of God.***

Worship is eminently practical because adoring and affectionate praise is what restores our sense of ultimate value. It exposes the worthless and temporary and tawdry stuff of this world. Worship energizes the heart to seek satisfaction in Jesus alone. In worship we are reminded that this world is fleeting and unworthy of our heart's devotion. Worship connects our hearts with the transcendent power of God and awakens in us appreciation for true beauty. It pulls back the veil of deception and exposes the ugliness of sin and Satan. Worship is a joyful rebuke of the world. When our hearts are riveted on Jesus everything else in life becomes so utterly unnecessary and we become far less demanding.

Prostrate in Praise!

Why did the Elders fall face down? Did you notice that over and over again, they hit the dirt, prostrate in God's presence (4:10; 5:8, 14). Did one of the four living creatures shove them? Was it simply mechanical obedience to some heavenly liturgy? What did they see or hear or feel or believe or think that could have induced such an extravagant response? What possessed them to fall over and over and over again?

No sooner do they stand than they fall! It isn't that they fall, come to their senses, and then stand, dusting themselves off, a little embarrassed for having momentarily lost their composure. No! They stand, come to their senses, and ***then*** fall! The only reasonable, rational, sensible thing to do is to fall down! They can't bear the thought of standing in the presence of such beauty and glory. Nothing would be more inappropriate or out of order than to remain upright and erect. They don't fall because they are wounded or weak or intimidated or fearful. ***They fall because they are stunned!***

Earlier, in Revelation 4:8, we read that the four living creatures do not cease day or night from praising. Why? Is it an expression of mere "duty"? Is their adoration coerced or perhaps the fruit of bribery? Undoubtedly not! Consider every alternative. What else could possibly compare with the joy of unending adoration and delight in the splendor of God? No one put a gun to their head or threatened them with hell should they decline to worship. Why should they cease? For what possible reason should they give up their praise? To do ***what?*** To go ***where?*** To see ***whom?*** What can compare, what can rival, what can compete in its capacity to fascinate and fulfill and satisfy and entrance? Is there another god more splendid? Is there another god more beautiful?

True worship, such as we see in Revelation 4-5, is not simply unending, it is ***uninhibited***. The atmosphere around the throne is charged with an unashamed exuberance. Physical expressions of delight and fear and joy and awe are a commonplace. Our personal preferences notwithstanding, ***in heaven affections are ablaze for God. Bodies are prostrate in his presence. Praise is passionate. Enjoyment is extravagant. There is little, if any, fear of feelings.***

I don't believe it's possible to truly understand and appreciate the great things of God without being stirred with passion and zeal and joy and delight and fervor. Only obdurate spiritual blindness prevents the human soul from being greatly impressed and powerfully moved by the revelation of such eternal splendor.

The Scroll

I agree with most biblical scholars that "the content of the ***scroll*** is ***God's redemptive plan***, foreshadowed in the Old Testament, by which he means to assert his sovereignty over a sinful world and so to achieve the purpose of creation.

John proposes to trace the whole operation of this plan from its beginnings in the Cross to its triumphal culmination in the New Jerusalem” (G. B. Caird, 72). ***The scroll contains the content, course, and consummation of history***, how things will end for both Christian and non-Christian.

All creation in heaven and earth stands motionless and speechless as a search is undertaken for someone worthy to open this book. Is no one capable of bringing history to its ordained end? Call your Congressman! Call your Senator! Write letters of inquiry to the most brilliant of scientists and astrophysicists! If necessary, get in touch with the White House! Surely someone here on earth is worthy enough and strong enough to open the book of human history and tell us its contents and its consummation.

No. John’s disappointment evokes a flood of tears as he contemplates the painful postponement of God’s redemptive purposes. Is there ***no one*** who can take authority over history and insure that God’s enemies will be judged and his people vindicated?

Yes, there is. But when this person appears, symbolically in the form of an animal, it isn’t what John expected. After first seeing a ***lion*** (in v. 5), he is amazed to see a ***lamb*** (in v. 6)! And what is even more amazing is that the Lion and the Lamb are one person! The fact that it is a “lamb” points to his atoning sacrifice (Isa. 53:7; perhaps also the Passover Lamb is in view). Yet this lamb is ***“standing, as though it had been slain,”*** or more literally, ***“slaughtered”***, with its throat cut.

But if it is slain, how does it stand? Clearly, having once been slain the Lamb has now been raised. Here we see again the glorious truth of ***resurrection!*** The Lamb isn’t slumped over in a lifeless heap or limping along as if on its last legs. ***The Lamb stands as a sign of its resurrected life!*** This is John’s forthright way of saying in no uncertain terms: ***Jesus Christ is alive!***

Victory is achieved not by the sword but by a sacrifice. Jesus conquers through the cross! The power to change lives and orchestrate history flows from the love of a crucified carpenter who then literally and physically rose from the dead! As I explained to you last week, ***our King, Jesus Christ, does not win converts by killing his enemies, but by dying for them! And then rising again to eternal life.***

In the presence of such redemptive splendor, there is only one appropriate response: ***singing!*** But before we note the singing don’t miss the reference to praying. The ***“prayers of the saints”*** (v. 8b) are more than simple requests or petitions for personal blessing. They are more than likely impassioned pleas of men and women on earth, in the church, for God to reveal his glory and his justice in bringing righteous retribution on the enemies and in vindicating truth and goodness (see 6:9-11; 8:3-4).

The four living creatures and the 24 Elders sing a ***“new song”*** (cf. Ps. 98:1-3; Isa. 42:10-13) because the Lamb has defeated the powers of evil and has inaugurated a new creation. And why is the lamb worthy of praise? Because he has died, and by dying has redeemed men and women from every corner of the earth, and by redeeming them has made them (i.e., you and me!) into a kingdom and into priests.

But merely dying wouldn’t have accomplished much if the Lamb were still in the grave, rotting and suffering decay. ***The Lamb stands! The Lamb is alive!***

We come to praise and worship God as ***kings and priests in his kingdom***. I am here reminded, in awe yet again, of something my friend Mike Bickle has often said: ***“What kind of God makes kings of his enemies?”***

Suddenly there is a snowball effect that leads to an avalanche of praise. A holy turbulence engulfs the heavens. As the choir sings of God’s majesty the adoration of the lamb moves out in ever-widening circles (see vv. 11-13), almost a ripple effect as if a huge stone had been cast into the center of an otherwise calm lake.

At first, it was the ***four living creatures*** singing their song of praise. They are then joined by the ***twenty-four elders***. In v. 11 ***myriads and myriads and thousands and thousands of angels*** follow suit. And if that were not sufficient, we read in v. 13 that ***“every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them”*** begin to praise the risen Lamb. The seven-fold shout of worship in v. 12 rings out like the resounding chimes of a huge bell:

POWER! . . . WEALTH! . . . WISDOM! . . . MIGHT! . . . HONOR! . . . GLORY! . . . BLESSING!

Education – Exultation – Exaltation

If we don't know who God is and how he thinks and what he feels and why he does what he does, we have no grounds for joy, no reason to celebrate, no basis for finding satisfaction in him. That is why our careful and meticulous study of the heavenly vision in Revelation 5 is so crucial to our lives as Christians.

Delight in God cannot occur in an intellectual vacuum. Our joy is the fruit of what we know and believe to be true of God. Emotional heat such as joy, delight, and gladness of heart, apart from intellectual light (i.e., the knowledge of God) is useless. Worse still, it is dangerous, for it inevitably leads to fanaticism and idolatry. The experience of heaven's inhabitants confirms that our knowledge of God (*education*) is the cause or grounds for our delight in him (*exultation*), which blossoms in the fruit of his praise and honor and glory (*exaltation*).

What this tells us is that *the ultimate goal of theology isn't knowledge, but worship*. If our learning and knowledge of God do not lead to the joyful praise of God, we have failed. We learn only that we might laud, which is to say that theology without doxology is idolatry. The only theology worth studying is a theology that can be sung!

A Glorious and Unending Reality!

We must resist any inclination to disregard John's vision as irrelevant, as if it were but a distant dream, an ethereal far off heavenly phenomenon of which we on earth can only wonder. *This is not virtual reality. This is no computer-generated facsimile*. It is far more real than anything this temporal world can offer.

The glory of the Holy Spirit is that he can take each syllable of this inspired portrait and set it ablaze that the fire of its truth and life-changing power might forever burn within our hearts. Thus may we be led to join the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures and the chorus of countless millions of angels, together with the redeemed even now in heaven, in the relishing and enjoyment of our great and glorious God!

Adoration of the Lion and the Lamb

What is it about Jesus that makes him worthy of your adoration and praise? What is it about Jesus that makes him irresistibly attractive? Why is he alone worthy of your whole-hearted allegiance and love?

Consider once again the portrait of Jesus in symbolic language. In Revelation 5:5 he is called "*the Lion of the tribe of Judah,*" but in Revelation 5:6 is also portrayed as the "*Lamb*" who had been slain, though now standing, because alive. So, which is he? Both! Jesus is both Lion and Lamb. And it is in this glorious juxtaposition of what appear to be two contrasting images that we find the answer to our question.

Think about this for a moment:

The Lion in whom we find unimpeachable authority is also the Lamb who embodies humility and meekness in the highest degree.

The Lion who wields power and strength that none can resist is also the Lamb who walked this earth in weakness and suffering, resisting none.

The Lion who rules the world and governs its every move is also the Lamb who was meekly led to slaughter by his enemies.

The Lion who is known for his uncompromising commitment to righteousness is also the Lamb who overflows in love to sinners like you and me.

The Lion whose majestic beauty captivates the human heart is also the Lamb who condescended to take upon himself the likeness of a man and was, in appearance, quite ordinary and unimpressive.

The Lion who commands total obedience from everyone is also the Lamb who in his earthly life submitted himself in obedience to the law of God.

The Lion who is holy and pure beyond our wildest imagination is also the Lamb who is gracious and kind and tender-hearted to all.

The Lion who could silence a raging storm with a single word is also the Lamb who refused to speak or revile against those who nailed him to a cross.

The Lion who is life itself is also the Lamb who willingly dies for his enemies.

The Lion who is exalted high above the heavens, immeasurably beyond all of creation and myriads of angels, before whom the greatest and most powerful kings and commanders on earth are but a speck of dust on the balance, is also the Lamb who stooped low, who condescended to become one of us and suffer the trials and challenges put upon him by weak and sinful men.

The Lion who is in himself infinite holiness and righteousness and purity and power is also the Lamb who welcomes broken sinners into his presence and makes intimate friends of his enemies.

The Lion who in himself needs nothing, being altogether self-sufficient, is also the Lamb who gives and gives and then gives yet again so generously and abundantly.

The Lion who is in himself of such blinding glory and brilliance that adoring angels cover their faces is also the Lamb who humbled himself and identified with his creatures so that they might behold him and enjoy him forever.

The Lion who, as Paul says in Philippians 2, exists from all eternity in perfect equality with the Father and the Spirit, equal in all respects as to his divinity, is also the Lamb who in time and history humbled himself and took on the likeness of sinful men and women.

The Lion who is known for his majesty is also the Lamb who is known for his meekness.

The Lion who commands absolute obedience from his creatures is also the Lamb who in obedience honored every command of his Father.

The Lion who rightly burns with wrath against the rebellious and unbelieving is also the Lamb who in the place of the rebellious and unbelieving endured in his own body and soul that very wrath.

He is at one and the same time a Lion-like-Lamb and a Lamb-like-Lion without any inconsistency or contradiction.

He alone is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals. Why? Because, as v. 5 says, *he "has conquered."* But how? How is death a victory? According to vv. 9-10, he was slain. He was killed. He was slaughtered. But his death that would seem to be an indication of defeat was a death in the place of sinners, a death that ransomed and redeemed them from slavery to sin and brought them to God to serve and enjoy him as a kingdom of believer priests.

But this death would have been to no avail had he not risen to life again! The Lamb who was slain, so we are told in v. 13, now sits on the throne of heaven. He is alive!

I can do no better in summing up than by quoting the words of John Piper:

“The Lion of Judah conquered because he was willing to act the part of a Lamb. He came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday like a King on the way to a throne, and he went out of Jerusalem on Good Friday like a Lamb on the way to the slaughter. He drove out the robbers from the Temple like a Lion devouring its prey. And then at the end of the week he gave his majestic neck to the knife, and they slaughtered the Lion of Judah

like a Lamb. So he conquered sin and death and Satan not just because he was a Lion, but because he was a Lamb-like Lion. The Lion gets the victory through the tactics of the Lamb” (John Piper).

Is it any wonder, then, that when George Frederick Handel read and reflected on the vision of the Lion-like-Lamb and the Lamb-like-Lion, Jesus Christ, he put to music these glorious words:

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ.
And He shall reign for ever and ever,
King of kings, and Lord of lords,
And He shall reign forever and ever,
King of kings, forever and ever,
And Lord of lords,
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
And He shall reign forever and ever,
King of kings! and Lord of lords!
And He shall reign forever and ever,
King of kings! and Lord of lords!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Roll call!