

The Lion and the Lamb

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[0 : 00] Imagine you are in the car and you're stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic, pouring down rain. I know it's going to be a stretch, but do your best to picture being in that situation.

Imagine actually there are two people, both stuck in the same bumper-to-bumper traffic, next to each other, side-by-side in their cars.

Person A is sitting there in that traffic, and that person is thinking, I'm wasting so much time. I know I should have left earlier. Why didn't I leave earlier? I'm going to be late now.

Why are they doing construction at this time of day? That person is agonizing over being in this situation. Why can't they add more lanes? This is why I hate living in this city.

Imagine person B sitting in the exact same traffic, next lane over. That person is thinking, you know, this is a really great and unexpected chance for me to decompress.

[0 : 59] Gives me a little more time to gather my thoughts. Maybe I could spend some time praying. Maybe I could start listening to a podcast that I've been looking forward to starting. Maybe this is a good opportunity for me to call that friend that I've been meaning to call but haven't gotten around to it.

I could call him right now. I have some time to talk. If you compare person A and person B, they're both having the exact same experience at the exact same time, the exact same circumstance.

And yet, I guarantee you, their experience of that is going to be vastly different. Person A is probably going to feel drained. They're going to feel depressed.

They're going to feel frustrated. They're going to have a sense of futility. Person B, I got a little too excited there.

Person B is probably going to have the opposite experience. Person B is probably going to be sitting there, you know, feeling a little more relaxed. A little more energized. A little more, you know, maybe even a sense of gratitude at having this unexpected gift of time.

[2 : 18] Now, we all have tendencies in one direction or the other, but here's the point I want to make. This is just a small example of a very important principle that we're going to be exploring together this morning.

And the principle is essentially this. Perspective determines perseverance. Perspective determines perseverance.

It makes it makes it possible for us to face and endure all kinds of pain and suffering. The low-grade pain and suffering of being stuck in traffic all the way up to the worst pain and suffering we can imagine.

The kinds of experiences we hope and pray we never have to go through in our lives. This is the perspective that will enable us to persevere through anything that might come our way.

And we see this perspective in Revelation chapter 5. The apostle John is suffering. He's suffering persecution. He's suffering what he calls tribulation.

[3 : 43] He's in exile on a prison island because of his faith. And he's writing to Christians who are also facing suffering and persecution. So John and his fellow Christians are desperately in need of a perspective that will help them persevere through whatever comes.

And John is on this island and he is praying to the Lord. He is ostensibly crying out, asking God to intervene and to help.

And it's fascinating to see what God does. We see this in the previous chapter. But God meets him in that prayer. And what does God do? How does God change his perspective? He invites him to join in to a heavenly worship service in the sanctuary of heaven before the throne of God.

And what we see in Revelation chapter 5 is that worship transforms John's perspective. He sees four images that when taken together transform his entire way of making sense of the pain and suffering in his own life.

That's what we're going to look at this morning. So let's pray. Lord, we just sang this beautiful song together, celebrating the words of this text, Lord.

[5 : 02] Our hearts are being warmed to it. Our minds are being opened to it. Lord, now what we really need is for you to speak. We need your word to be the word that we hear.

I need it. We all need it, Lord. So we ask you now through the power of your spirit that we might encounter you through your word. That you would prepare us, Lord, to come to your table to receive the gift that you offer.

We pray this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. So John, beginning in chapter 4, is invited into this heavenly throne room.

And so a door literally opens in the heavens in this vision that John has given. He's taken up in the spirit. And the first thing that jumps out as we begin to look at the description of what he sees is this.

Everything in this heavenly sanctuary is centered on the throne of God. He realizes this isn't just a sanctuary. It's a throne room. And everything's oriented toward the throne.

[6 : 01] What we realize almost immediately is that this is not just a throne. This is the throne of thrones. In other words, this is the essence of all thrones.

All kingly authority is a mere shadow of this authority. All thrones are echoes of this throne.

Our perspective on pain and suffering has to begin with the reality of God himself and the throne of heaven.

Do we believe that there is a God who created all of this and has authority over it or not? That's where it has to begin.

The French mathematician Blaise Pascal understood the enormity of this question. In his *pensées*, he wrote that what we believe about this question determines everything else.

[7 : 02] Are we just cosmic accidents floating through a meaningless universe? Or were we created by God as beings with a purpose?

And Pascal says, it is impossible to take one step with sense and judgment unless we regulate our course by our view on this point.

Everything else we do is going to be determined by our answer to that question. If there is no God, then we have to accept, as the atheist Richard Dawkins put it, that life has no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

When it comes to dealing with pain and suffering, that is a very hard world to live in, a world of blind, pitiless indifference. It means that if you suffer, if you struggle, you just were dealt a bad hand.

And that's that. The writer Julian Barnes is an agnostic in his book, *Nothing to be Frightened of*. He admits very candidly that without belief in God, the idea of suffering and dying is terrifying to him.

[8 : 20] Because he says there's no justice, there's no meaning, there's no ultimate narrative. And this is the reality. If there is no God, then there is no grand narrative to give meaning or purpose to our suffering.

Our suffering is meaningless. And meaningless suffering is by far the hardest to endure. That's what Viktor Frankl discovered in the concentration camp.

That those who suffered without meaning were by far the worst off. The people who survived, who even thrived in the midst of those horrible conditions were the people who were able to find meaning in the suffering that they faced.

That was the difference. Meaningless suffering is the worst kind of suffering. And it could be that the Apostle John was at a place where he's been suffering long enough. He's been on this island, isolated.

It could be that he was at a point where he was feeling this kind of hopelessness. But then he goes to worship. And when he goes to worship, he remembers there is a God who sits on the throne.

[9 : 25] And that is the throne of the world. There is a God over all of this. And all of reality flows out of the objective, external, self-existent reality of God.

And what that means is that there is a purpose to all of this. There is meaning behind our existence. There is such a thing as right and wrong and a foundation for justice.

There is a throne above all earthly thrones. In other words, there is accountability over all earthly thrones. However, this realization then immediately presents us with another problem.

If there is a God and I'm suffering and a lot of people I know are suffering, why is that the case? This is an age-old question.

How can a God who sits on the throne of thrones, who is all-powerful and presumably all-good, how can a God like that allow suffering to exist?

[10 : 30] And for that, we need the next image, the scroll. The image of the scroll. God, John sees the throne. He sees everything oriented toward the throne. And then he sees that there is a scroll in the right hand of the one who sits on the throne of God.

Now, in the ancient world, if you're dealing with a legal document, a scroll that was a legal document, like a will or a contract, you would normally have several witnesses who would, you know, you would roll the scroll up, this official document, and then you would have several witnesses present who would pour wax along that seal, and then they would have normally like a signet ring or some representation of themselves as a witness, and they would put that symbol down into the hot wax.

So you'd have several seals going along the seam of the scroll representing several witnesses, and that would keep the scroll closed. And legal documents, this is kind of a key point here, legal documents only took effect when the seal was broken.

And it had to be delivered to the appropriate person. There was an authorized person who was authorized to break the seal, to open the scroll, and when that happened, then the contents of the scroll would be legally inactive.

That's when it became active. So, John sees a scroll in God's right hand. It is sealed with seven seals, seven witnesses. And we know from the Old Testament imagery, prophets like Daniel and Ezekiel, what this scroll represents.

[12 : 05] This is God's entire plan for the world itself. This is God's entire plan to bring justice, and to bring renewal, and to bring healing, and to eradicate pain and suffering and death.

This is God's entire plan to fix all that is broken. So John realizes, not only is there a God who sits on the throne, giving meaning and purpose to everything, but that God has a plan to put the world right again.

And I think this is tremendously important for our perspective on pain and suffering in our lives and in the world, because the truth is, when we ask this question of suffering, how can God allow suffering?

What kind of God would do that? The truth is, if you understand Scripture, God hates suffering far more than we do. Far more than we do. Because it was not a part of his original creation.

It's the result of the fall. When the first humans rebel, and God essentially comes upon them and says, what have you done? It's because God sees all of the implications of this rebellion.

[13 : 24] So suffering and pain are one of the symptoms of the fact that we live in a world that is in rebellion against God. So no matter how much things like this seem like they don't make sense from our perspective, John realizes God has a plan for the world.

He has a plan for our lives. No matter how much it seems otherwise. This scroll means that everything in our lives is part of God's plan. It means that everything that you're experiencing right now is part of that plan.

I would go so far as to say that everything that we've experienced is written in that scroll. You know, it makes a point of saying, you know, most scrolls, you would take papyrus and you would attach them end to end, and then as much as you needed to, and you would typically only write on one side of the scroll, because there's one side of the scroll where the grain is horizontal, and the other side, it's vertical, because they would double up papyrus to make it stronger.

And so typically, you'd only write on one side of the scroll, because it was easier to write on that side of the scroll. And then when you got done, when it was the length that needed to be, you'd roll it up. But John makes a point of telling us this scroll is written entirely on the back and entirely on the front.

There's no empty space on the scroll, front and back, entirely covered with writing. I think that's a literary device. It's a way of saying all of history, everything that has ever happened ever will happen, it's all recorded here.

[14 : 51] The entire plan is laid out. All of our lives are written into this scroll. So this is tremendously hopeful. God does not waste our suffering. He hates it, but he doesn't waste it.

It will all get folded into God's plan. One day it will make sense. That's what the scroll means. However, there's another problem that arises. The scroll, as I said, is sealed.

A mighty angel asks, who's worthy to open the scroll and break its seals? Everyone looks around. John looks around. They realize there's no one in heaven or earth or under the earth who is worthy to open the scroll.

And John begins to weep loudly with hopeless despair. And I think if we reflect for a couple of moments on his weeping, we realize most of us can probably identify with John's tears.

This is the sorrow of chaos and the unknown. This is the grief over war and poverty and oppression.

[16 : 03] It's the grief we feel over our powerlessness when we see horrible things happening in the lives of other people and we can't do anything to stop it. Powerlessness we feel in our own lives.

These are the tears that we shed over divorce and miscarriages and abuse and terminal illness.

This is the fear that ultimately evil will win or has won. This is the fear that nothing matters. This is the fear that all of this, all hope is just an illusion.

I think John's tears represent all of that. All right, so he's weeping because he realizes there is a God. That God has a plan to deal with pain and suffering, but this plan hinges on there being someone who is able to do what needs to be done.

And apart from that someone, God's plan cannot be enacted. It might as well not exist. As the third image comes into view, we begin to see why.

[17 : 15] We begin to see why there is no one worthy. Something bizarre happens, and that's saying a lot for the book of Revelation. One of the elders, verse 5, 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. But then when John turns to look, he doesn't see a lion.

This is the strange part. He doesn't see. Behold the lion of Judah. John turns to see what he's talking about. He doesn't see a lion. I saw a lamb standing as though it had been slain.

In ancient literature, these are diametrically opposed images. Lions are symbols of strength and royalty and conquest and power and dominion.

Lambs, by contrast, are symbols of weakness and helplessness and sacrifice. So there's this question that immediately rises, who is this being?

[18 : 27] Who is this being? Are we seeing a ferocious, conquering lion? Or is this being a feeble lamb? And of course, the answer is both.

The lion is the lamb. So we say, well, what's going on here? Well, let's go back to the scroll for just a moment. The scroll means that God has a plan to put the world right again.

God has a plan to restore all that has been broken. But in order to do that, in order to accomplish that, God has to judge the world. The only way to put the world right again is to bring perfect justice, which means all wrongs have to be punished.

All sin has to be paid for, including our own. And here's where it gets complicated. Here's the problem. If God doesn't bring perfect justice, then he's not ultimately fixing the world.

He can't ultimately bring hope to the world if he doesn't bring perfect justice. There will still be evil. There will still be suffering. There will still be injustice. So if God doesn't bring perfect justice, there's no hope for the world.

[19 : 42] But if God does bring perfect justice, then what hope is there for people like me, for people like you? And that's the paradox that we find ourselves in.

How can God bring hope both to the world and to the people in the world? Right? This helps us understand why there's no one worthy to break the seals, because you would need someone unimaginable.

You would need someone who is able to bring perfect judgment, who's able to eradicate all evil and suffering. But that same being would also have to be able to extend mercy to people who deserve judgment.

And how do you bring perfect justice and at the same time extend mercy to people who deserve that justice? Because it's not as simple as just overlooking things. That's not justice.

That's favoritism. That's divine favoritism. So how do you punish all sin but save those people who have committed that sin? And this is a paradox all through the Old Testament.

[20 : 51] It's never really resolved in a satisfying way, because sometimes in the Old Testament, God seems like a God of judgment. Other times, he seems like a God of inexhaustible mercy. And how do you resolve that? And really, you get up through the prophets there at the end, and it's really not resolved.

The answer is, you need someone who can be both a lion and a lamb at the same time. And there's only one being in existence who is able to do both of those things, and that is Jesus Christ.

And this is how God is able to bring perfect justice to the world, and yet show unlimited mercy to the world. The only way that happens is if the lion is the lamb.

Jesus is the judge, and yet he took on judgment. Jesus is the conqueror, and yet he allowed himself to be conquered. Jesus is the king, but his coronation was in fact his crucifixion.

And this is the great hope of the world, that Jesus has defeated sin and death through his own death on the cross.

[21 : 58] This is why we are able to hear of this victory in the past tense. Weep no more. For behold, the lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered. So he can open the scroll.

We have to realize, by the way, what we are reading here. Little Easter egg. Here's what we're actually reading. We read in the book of Acts how after Jesus appears to his disciples, commissions them to go and make disciples of all the world, fills them, you know, promises that they'll be filled with the Holy Spirit.

He then does what? He ascends. He ascends in victory. Where does he go? He ascends to the throne room of heaven. This is what we refer to as the ascension of Christ.

In Acts, the book of Acts, we get that, the perspective of the ascension from earth. In Revelation 5, we get the perspective of the ascension of Christ from heaven.

This is the description of the ascension of Christ, the victorious Christ. When Jesus ascends in Acts 1, the disciples watch him disappear. And then in Revelation 5, John sees him appear.

[23 : 13] He arrives in the throne room, and a great celebration unfolds because what? He has conquered. He has done it. And of course, when this lamb arrives, John's weeping turns into joy.

All of heaven breaks out in song. And then we see the fourth and final image, the great multitude. All of heaven sings. And it's just worth reading because I couldn't do better than this.

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.

They're referring to the cross. And you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth. This is a song of global redemption.

So these four images transform our perspective on all of the pain and suffering and injustice in this world, in this present moment.

[24 : 14] All right, so think about what we said at the very beginning of this time together. When people face pain and suffering, whether it's physical pain or emotional pain or grief and loss, fear, anxiety, depression, conflict, illness, whatever it may be.

We cannot always change our circumstances. In fact, very often we can't change our circumstances. But we can always change our perspective on our circumstances.

If we see pain and suffering as random and meaningless, it's going to make it exponentially harder for us to endure it. And so we need a renewed perspective.

And that leads us, there's only one real application from this text this morning. I think this shows us, among other things, why regular gathered Christian worship is so important for Christians, for everyone.

It's why regular weekly worship needs to be among our highest priorities. Because I would say, at least in my own life, it is almost impossible to keep this perspective.

[25 : 26] It is almost impossible to keep this perspective unless you're regularly being reminded of it again and again and again. Worship is what elevates our perspective. Worship doesn't deny pain.

It's actually a place where you could be very honest about your pain. But it's a place where your pain, it's not denied. It's actually placed in the context of a cosmic redemption story.

And you're reminded, we're reminded again and again, oh, this isn't all there is. This isn't the way my life is always going to be. This is a moment, as Paul says, a light momentary affliction.

Right? And Paul suffered quite a bit more than most of us. So every Sunday when we gather for worship, we are reminded of these core truths. It's no coincidence that all of the themes that we've been talking about this morning, they're all present every time we gather.

We are reminded at the very beginning, blessed be God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those are the first words spoken in our time together. We're reminded that there is a God who sits on the throne of the world.

[26 : 31] And because of that, we know that our lives are not random. There's purpose and meaning to all of this. We're reminded that God has a plan for the world and for our lives.

That God doesn't waste our suffering. That one day everything's going to make sense. We are reminded, as we go to our knees in confession, that we can't make the world right on our own.

As hard as many of us try. Because even though we suffer, we are also part of the problem. Only Jesus, the lion who is a lamb, can make the world right through his death and resurrection on the cross.

We're reminded why we need him. And we can't do it on our own. And then every time we gather, we are joining in with the multitude. You need to understand that as we sing, confess our faith, pray, our voices are commingling with the heavenly chorus.

Who is even now singing praise to the lamb. So when we gather, when we sing, when we pray, when we celebrate, as we have this morning, the worthiness of the lamb.

[27 : 42] We stop interpreting our lives through our wounds. And we begin to make sense of our lives and interpret our lives through his wounds.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the lamb. The lion who is a lamb and he is worthy. And we pray that in his worthiness, in his victory, in his conquest, in his sacrifice, through his suffering, we might be able to make sense of everything that we face.

Lord, we pray that it would give us the strength to endure it, to persevere through it. Lord, that we would, as we just said, that we would come more and more not to interpret our lives through our wounds, but through his wounds.

That, Lord, the lamb who was slain, Lord, that that would be the central focus that enables us to endure whatever comes. That answers our questions about suffering.

That gives us hope to endure. We pray your particular blessing and presence in ministry to all of those here this morning who may be facing acute suffering. Lord, we pray that this would speak to them, that you would speak to them.

[28 : 59] That you would make yourself known to them. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen.