

The Lamb Who Overcomes

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[0 : 00] More than any other section of the last book of the Bible, this section puts things into perspective for me. Indeed, more than any other section of the whole Bible, this section helps me keep my balance in the midst of all that is going on in the world right now.

Apocalyptic literature does that. Apocalyptic literature puts things into perspective, into cosmic perspective.

Apocalyptic literature has two great pastoral purposes, two great practical purposes. And as I've been saying in this series, if we'll keep these purposes before us, we will not go astray as we read the apocalypse of Jesus Christ.

The first practical pastoral purpose is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future.

Jesus is coming and he is bringing with him a new heaven and a new earth. He's bringing with him a new city, a city full of energy and creativity, a city full of beauty and glory, a city in which we experience intimacy with God that we never imagined was possible.

[1 : 25] And we will focus on that future during the Sundays of Advent. We'll work through Revelation 21 and 22 under the title.

So what are we waiting for? First practical purpose. Set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future. But secondly, and primarily set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.

More is going around us than we can figure out on our own, no matter how intelligent we might be. More is going on around us than we can deduce with our brains or intuit with our hearts or imagine with our imaginations.

And it is the purpose of apocalyptic literature to open up that more. What the Apostle John discovers and then we discover, or as I should put it, what is disclosed to John and then disclosed to us, is that worship of the living God is going on all around us all the time.

Center of unbroken praise, as the great hymn puts it. Joyful, joyful, we adore thee. Center of unbroken praise.

[2 : 59] Worship of the living God is taking place all around us all the time. Which has very practical implications for us in this visible, tangible dimension of our existence.

It means that worship does not only happen on the Lord's day. And it means that worship does not begin when we start to sing, and it will not end when we stop singing.

Whenever we enter into a time of worship, we enter into a service already in progress. Always already in progress.

The Apostle John is on the prison island of Patmos. Why? Why is he there? Because he refused to worship.

He would not join in the worship of Caesar. The worship that held the Roman Empire together. Respect Caesar? Yes.

[4 : 10] Or at least, maybe. Pay taxes to Caesar? Okay. Pray for Caesar? Certainly. But worship Caesar as Lord and God, as Domini et Deus?

No. To worship Caesar would mean that John is denying everything he has discovered about who God is in Jesus Christ.

To join in the worship of a mere mortal. To join in the worship of a nation state would be to deny everything he knows about Jesus Christ. And so he is sent to the prison island as a political troublemaker, as an atheist.

On a Lord's day, in the spirit, as he says, he was worshiping. He was worshiping the triune God of grace in the power of the spirit. He was worshiping alone.

He was alone, by himself, on the rock pile. In those miserable circumstances, choosing to lift his soul in worship. And then, to his surprise, he discovers that he is not alone at all.

[5 : 26] He discovers that somehow on the prison island, he has entered into worship that has been going on for a long time.

Worship already in progress. Worship always already in progress. Through Revelation 4 and 5, we have an apocalypse of the present moment.

Worship is taking place quite apart from us. Thank you. And the only question is, will we enter in? Revelation 4 and 5 is the opening scene of the second act of the great drama Jesus put on for John on Patmos.

The first act is Revelation 1 to 3, where Jesus stands in the middle of the candlesticks, in the middle of the seven churches, and gives his authoritative messages to each of the churches.

[6 : 30] That act closes, and the second act opens with the verb open. 4-1. After these things, I looked and behold, or look, a door standing open in heaven.

A new act with new scenery, new props, new characters, and new costumes. Continuing all the way through Revelation 11-18.

And then in 11-19, the third act begins also around the verb open. And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened.

So too the fourth and fifth acts, all opening with the verb open. And yes, all the acts of the drama go together in a grand chiasm.

A number of you wrote me emails this past week to ask whether or not the whole book goes together chiasically. It does, which I will show you, God willing, after Christmas in the new year.

[7 : 35] In the opening scene of the second act, we meet the two most dominant images of the rest of the book.

A throne and a lamb. In the third act, we will meet the other major image, the dragon. But for now, the two dominant images.

The two images that stand after the dragon is defeated, praise God. A throne and a lamb. Well, here's the plan for the rest of the time today.

Let's simply walk through this scene, making some observations about what is going on. And then let us draw out three major implications for our lives today.

Walk through this scene and then draw out three major implications. Walk through. I looked, says John, and behold.

[8 : 39] It is the command. Look. It is the second most frequent command in the apocalypse of Jesus Christ. The first most frequent command is do not be afraid.

We obey the first by obeying the second. Look. The implication being, turn and look. Turn away from all you are looking at.

And right now on the television, it is not pleasant. And look. A door. A door into heaven.

Open. That is worth the price of the ticket to come to the drama. Open. Open. The door into heaven is open.

With the sense that it will never be closed. Never closed. Always open. Because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, the door into heaven is open.

[9 : 45] And with John, we are invited to go through the door. Into heaven. As I pointed out on a number of other occasions. In the Bible, heaven is not a far away place.

Heaven is another dimension of reality very close at hand. Very close. All around us. Ordinarily hidden. Not audible.

Not touchable. But very close at hand. The door into that other dimension of reality is open. So John says he hears a voice say, come up here.

It's the voice he heard at the beginning of his experience that day on Patmos. It's the voice of Jesus. Come up here. Because John has recorded his experience for us and written down for us, we know that this voice is also calling us today.

Come up here. The door is open. Come farther up and further in. And then John says that he was immediately in the spirit as he had been at the beginning of that Lord's day.

[11 : 01] And then another behold, another look, a throne. Along with the lamb, it is the dominant image of the rest of the book. Look, a throne.

This is not the first time that we've met the throne in the last book of the Bible. We met it at the end of Act 1. At the end of the seventh letter, the letter to Laodicea.

Jesus promises those who overcome, Revelation 3:21, I will grant you to sit down on my throne as I have overcome and sat down on my father's throne.

And we will meet this throne again and again as the drama unfolds, leading to the wonderful claim of 21:5.

He who sits on the throne said, Behold, look, I am making all things new. Now, the fact is, John was not the first human being to be given an apocalypse of the throne.

[12:12] It happened hundreds of years before to the prophet Ezekiel and the prophet Daniel. And John conveys what he saw about the throne through the words and images that Ezekiel and Daniel used as they conveyed what they saw about the throne.

It also happened to the prophet Micaiah. Speaking to one of the kings of Israel, Micaiah says, 2 Kings 22:19, I saw the Lord sitting on his throne and all the hosts of heaven around him.

It happened also to Isaiah. Isaiah 6, a text I'm sure many of you know very well. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne.

And then he goes on to speak of these creatures attending the throne who say, Holy, holy, holy. But as we shall see, what John sees is that things in heaven have changed since Ezekiel, Daniel, Micaiah and Isaiah.

Big time. Things in heaven have changed. Look, a throne with someone sitting on it.

[13:28] And we have every reason to believe that this one who's sitting on the throne is not going to fall off. He's not going to have a stroke or a heart attack.

King Uzziah dies. The emperor Domitian struts arrogantly across the stage of history and dies. But the great emperor remains seated on the throne.

Since the time that the prophets first had this apocalypse of the throne, the world has witnessed thousands of end-thronings and dethronings.

China has gone through ten major dynasty changes. Japan and India have gone through a whole lot more. Hundreds of powerful, threatening, seemingly invincible empires have come and gone. Samaria, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Ottoman Empire, the Inca and the Aztec.

[14:39] In the mere years that FBC, First Baptist Church, has been at this corner, history has witnessed the dethroning of the Spanish, Portuguese, Austro-Hungarian and Dutch empires.

Gone are the German reichs of Kaiser Wilhelm and Adolf Hitler, the Italian reign of Benito Mussolini, the Japanese reign of Emperor Hirohito, the reign of Haile Selassie of Egypt.

We have seen the rise and fall of Joseph Stalin, Vladimir Lenin, Nikita Khrushchev, Mao Tse-Sung, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, Ho Chi Minh.

We have witnessed the dismantling of the once mighty Soviet Union and the collapse of the apartheid heresy of South Africa. Hong Kong is now part of the People's Republic of China, further diminishing the once mighty British Empire.

Gone are Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. The United States teeters on the verge of the physical cliff, a symptom of even deeper instability.

[15:44] Do not be afraid. Look, a throne with someone sitting on it. Sitting, unmovable.

John will delight to say again and again in the rest of the letter, he who sits on the throne. And he who sits on the throne, says John, was like a jasper stone and sardius in appearance.

And later, from the throne proceed flashes of lightning. But of course, the living God is pure light. When Ezekiel saw the throne, he said the brilliance was like glowing metal.

When Daniel saw the throne, he said it was like flaming fire. Like, like, suggesting that there simply is no way to describe the quality and the quantity of light that shines forth and surrounds the one who sits on the throne.

Psalms 104, you cover yourself with light as a garment. Paul says to Timothy, he who is the blessed and only Savior, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality, dwells in unapproachable light.

[17:02] Whenever and wherever the living God makes himself known, there is light. Charles Wesley, long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night.

Thine eye diffused the quickening ray. I woke the dungeon, flamed with light. My chains fell off. My heart was free.

I rose, went forth, and followed thee. So John also sees seven lamps, a fire burning before the throne. He learns that these seven lamps are the seven spirits of God.

Seven is the number of completeness. Seven spirits of God is the way of saying the Holy Spirit in his completeness. The fire of God in his completeness.

The purity of God in his completeness. The creativity of God in his completeness. Very close at hand, spilling through the open door, upon and in and through the followers of the Emperor Jesus. [18:07] And John says he saw a rainbow around the throne. Of course, the rainbow is the sign of God's just mercy and merciful justice.

It's a sign that the one on the throne deals with human sin the way it deserves. The flood. And then deals with human sin the way it does not deserve. Mercy. Mercy. And he sees before the throne a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

I take this sea to represent the powers of chaos. The sea here doesn't refer to a body of water. It's the image for the power of chaos, which is always seeking to suck creation back into the void. And boy, we see that chaos in our time. Seeking to suck the world into the void, before the throne, clear as crystal. Calm. Subdued.

Shining with the beauty and orderliness of the one who sits on the throne. Which is why we have those experiences when in the midst of the chaos, we call out to God and there comes this unexplainable calm.

[19:17] In the presence of him who sits on the throne, chaos is subdued. And John sees 24 other thrones with 24 elders sitting on them, clothed in white garments and golden crowns on their head, assembled in a semicircle, just as the elders were in the Jewish Sanhedrin.

Does this mean that other thrones are moving in to rival the grand throne? No. It means that God has chosen to set up thrones around his throne and invite others in on his governing of the world. 24. 12 plus 12. 12 representing the people of God before Jesus comes. 12 representing the people of God after Jesus comes. God bringing his people around his throne to join him in his running of the world.

And John sees four living creatures around and very close in on the throne. Weird looking creatures.

I think representing the whole of creation like a lion, like a calf, like a man and like an eagle.

Creation gathered around the throne and in ceaseless praise.

[20:34] This is a major theme of the Bible. Creation knows there is a creator. And creation knows that this creator is altogether praiseworthy.

Which is why Jesus said on Palm Sunday when he was told to quiet the children who were singing, I tell you, if they're quiet, the rocks will cry out. Creation has not succumbed to the illusion which has passed a spell upon our culture.

Creation knows the truth. And creation worships. Day and night, says John, they do not cease to say, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

Over and over and over and over and over again. Creation never tires repeating the song. Holy, holy, holy.

And then John sees that the 24 elders are inspired by creation singing. The redeemed people of God hear creation singing and they join in.

[21:43] John says the elders cast their crowns before the throne and sing, Worthy are you, our Lord and God, Domini et Deus, stealing the thunder from Caesar to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things and because of your will they exist and live.

When the door into heaven is open, we rediscover the truth. The universe is not an accident. We are not an accident. The universe and we were created.

The universe has meaning. We have meaning. We are alive because the one who sits on the throne wills us to be alive. And now we come to the most dramatic moment of the drama.

Not only the most dramatic moment of the second act, but the most dramatic moment of the entire drama of the last book of the Bible, it is impossible to exaggerate the significance of this moment. John sees a scroll. It's in the right hand of the one who sits on the throne. It's written on the inside and on the outside. It's sealed up with seven seals. It's the scroll of history.

[23:02] It contains the plan and course of history. It shows how God is going to establish his kingdom on the earth. and John sees an angel asking in a loud voice who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?

Who indeed? Who has the wisdom to understand the flow of history? Who has the ability to guide history? Who can guide history to its inherent destiny? No one.

John learns. Revelation 5.3 No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth. No one was able to open the scroll and John wept. I began to weep greatly and then comes the moment. John sees one of the 24 elders say to him, Stop weeping. Look. There's that command again. Look. Look. The lion from the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has overcome and he can open the scroll and break its seals.

The lion of Judah, the root of David, are messianic titles. The lion has come. The lion has overcome. The lion can open the scroll. Yay!

[24 : 18] And then comes the great moment. John says he saw. He saw a gigantic, mighty lion.

Right? Rippling with muscles, armed to the teeth, roaring with a roar that levels everyone in his presence.

Right? He saw a roaring lion. The lion has overcome. Yay! And I saw a lion. No.

That's not what happened. Revelation 5, 6. And I saw. Ready? I saw between the throne. Between is not an accurate translation of the text.

It is in the middle of. In the center of the throne. In the very center. Ready? I saw in the middle of the throne. Which can only mean in the middle of the Almighty who sits on the throne.

[25 : 19] I saw in the middle of the throne. Ready? A lion. No. A lamb. I saw a lamb as if slain. I saw a lamb as if slain.

With seven horns. Horns are the image of strength. Seven horns. Complete strength. In the weakness of being slain.

Immensely powerful. With seven eyes. Eyes are the symbol of insight. Seven eyes. Complete insight. In the weakness of being slain.

Immensely wise. A lamb. As I point out in my book on this text in the Greek New Testament there are two words translated lamb.

One is amnos. This is the word that John the Baptist uses when he sees Jesus of Nazareth coming down the road and says look the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But the other word is arnion.

[26 : 18] A-R-N-I-O-N. It means young sheep. Little sheep. It means little lamb. Do not be afraid.

Look, the lion has overcome and I turned and I saw a little lamb. Mary's little lamb whose utter weakness slain on the cross turns out to be immense power and immense wisdom.

The lion does not overcome by being a lion. Lions never overcome. It appears they do but only for a moment because they're sowing the seeds of their own destruction when they take the way of the lion.

The lion overcomes by becoming a lamb and giving himself for the life of the world. And then John hears all of creation break out in joyous celebration.

The twenty-four elders sing a new song. The four creatures sing a new song. And everything in heaven and on earth and under the sea and on the sea sing a new song. And the elders fall down and worship in adoration just as the shepherds and the wise men did when they found the infant Jesus on Christmas Eve.

[27 : 35] Okay. Let us now draw out just three major implications from this scene. First, it is safe to go through the door and approach the throne of the universe.

because in the middle, in the very center of the one who sits on the throne is the lamb. The perfect, sufficient sacrifice for sin.

It matters not how badly you have sinned. Well, it does because sin ruins our lives and we end up with this unbearable burden of guilt and shame.

But it matters not how badly you have sinned. It is safe to approach the throne of the universe as if slain for the sin of the world.

As if slain, the lamb is in the very center, in the very heart of the one to whom we are accountable is this slain lamb. So the writer of the book of Hebrews joyfully declares, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace.

[28 : 44] It's the throne of grace because the lamb is right there in the middle of the throne. Before the throne of God above, I have a strong and perfect plea.

It's better than that. Not just before the throne of God above, but in the throne of God above. In the center of the throne of God above, I have a great and perfect plea.

A great high priest whose name is love. Whoever lives and pleads for me, my name is written on his hands. My name is written in his heart. I know that while in heaven he stands, no tongue can bid me

to depart.

No tongue can bid me to depart. Behold him there, the risen lamb, my perfect spotless righteousness, the great unchangeable I am, the king of glory and of grace.

One with him, I cannot die. My soul is purchased by his blood. Worthy are you to open the scroll and to break its seals because you were slain and you purchased for God men and women from every tribe and tongue and nation.

[29 : 52] My soul is purchased by his blood. My life is hid with Christ on high, with Christ my Savior and my God, with Christ my Savior and my God. Brothers and sisters, it is safe to come to the throne of the universe just as you are.

Second major exhortation. We now know the secret of history. Sacrificial love. God wins through sacrificial love.

Jesus wins through sacrificial love. In the middle, in the very center, sacrificial love, self-giving love, self-emptying love.

Lions do not win by being lions. In their arrogance and ferociousness and greed, they dig themselves deeper into the grip of sin. It's as a lamb that lions win.

Seven horns, immensely wise, seven eyes, immensely strong, seven eyes, immensely wise. And in his strength and wisdom, giving himself over to the power of sin and death on the cross.

[31 : 03] Ah, that's weakness and foolishness says those who do not yet get it. But through apparent weakness and foolishness, he wins. On the cross, he wins.

This is what Matthew, the gospel writer, wants us to see. In the moment that Jesus dies, he wins. In the moment he dies. In the moment he's slain. The curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom. The rocks begin to shake because creation is crying out and the graves are open. The graves are open. In the moment he dies. Because in the moment he dies, he wins.

In the moment he dies, he defeats death and death has to let its captives go. This is what C.S. Lewis was trying to help us understand in the Chronicles of Narnia.

Might be related to the word Arneon. Also on the lion does not win as a lion. Aslan breaks the spell of the witch when he lays helpless on the stone table and lets evil do to him what evil has wanted to do to humanity forever.

[32 : 11] And in the moment he dies, the deeper magic, as Aslan calls it, the deeper magic kicks in and death begins to work backwards. Sacrificial love, as weak and foolish as it appears, it overcomes.

Nothing else in this universe overcomes, but sacrificial love. This is the heart of God's way in the world. This is the heart of God's way with humanity and with history from right from the beginning. Everything God has been doing flows out of the heart of the Lamb in the very center of the one who sits on the throne. That's why later in Revelation we meet that phrase, slain from the foundation of the world.

The Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world. This has been the way from the beginning and it will be the way in the end. The secret of history from the beginning and to the end.

Third major implication. We are now reigning with the Lamb who overcame. Talking about an apocalypse.

[33 : 23] We, we are now reigning with the Lamb who reigns. A new song, Revelation 5.10 and you, the Lamb, have made them the people the Lamb purchased.

You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God. That's what John told us in the prologue. And they will reign upon the earth. Now, not in some distant future, but now, the Lamb who overcame reigns now and so do the people he has purchased.

We reign with him. Which is why the 24 other thrones are there in the picture. We have been brought in on the Lamb's governing of the world. Set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present and they will reign on the earth.

How? Secret of history. The same way he does. In sacrificial love. Sacrificial love moves history. The credit usually goes to those who wield great power. But they are not the real movers and shakers of history. Those who move history forward are those who, like the Lamb, who alone can open the scroll, like the Lamb, give themselves away in sacrificial service.

[34 : 54] many of you who will never get credit for the way you serve your families and serve those with whom you work.

You may never get credit, but this text is telling us you are the ones who make history move forward and who pray.

John sees the elders fall down before the Lamb and he sees that each one of them has golden bowls full of incense, which he discovers are the prayers of the people. We reign with the reigning Lamb when we join him in his praying, when we join him in his intercession from the throne.

The true movers and shakers of history are those who, day in, day out, day after day, day after day, pray the way the Lamb taught us to pray. Father, you're on the throne.

Cause your name to be honored on earth as it is in heaven. Cause your kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Cause your good pleasure to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[35 : 59] Thus, all the hymns and songs and choruses in this great scene in the service already in progress. Worthy are you because you created and worthy are you because you were slain.

Worthy. When Isaiah had his apocalypse of the throne hundreds of years before Jesus, his cry was, woe is me. That's because he became aware of his sin.

John's cry is, worthy are you. No longer, woe is me. That's the old way. And now it's, worthy are you. The hymns and the songs also are making a provocative political statement.

I often wonder, how did John smuggle this document out of prison without getting into more trouble? Worthy are you to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

Those are the very words people were to stand up and say when the emperor entered the senate chambers. Worthy are you, Caesar, to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

[37 : 11] Really? Caesar? Caesar's worthy of that. John knows who is worthy. The creator and the lamb who sits at the center of the creator.

You are worthy. worthy. That is the keynote of Christian worship. Not woe is me, but worthy are you.

Whenever we enter into a time of worship, we are entering into a service already in progress.

Always already in progress. And the question to ask after worship is not, what did I get out of it?

I am not the issue. To ask the question after worship, what did I get out of it, means that I have succumbed to the narcissism ruling our culture. We are not the issue of this event and never will be.

The question to ask after worship is, did I enter in? Did I join the four living creatures and the 24 elders? And did my heart want to fall down before the Lamb who overcomes?

[38 : 28] who is taking the bull[]ng and the two ends inijo when ne[]els income