

Looking for a Lion, Finding a Lamb

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[0 : 00] Can we again open our Bibles if you have one? Revelation chapter 5. Let's read verse 5 and verse 6. I don't know how familiar you are with the book of Revelation, but there's probably two main myths about the book of Revelation.

One is it's about the future. Many people who speculate about these things say that the book of Revelation talks about things that will happen in the future.

And they read all sorts of amazing things into the book. And especially in these days of power politics in the Middle East, there are many folks who say, well, it's obvious, it's all there in the book of Revelation.

Well, the book of Revelation, frankly, may allude to the future, but it is very much a book which talks about today. So that's mythology number one, that it's a book entirely about the future.

Mythology number two is that it's a difficult book. Now, there's a certain degree of truth in that. The book of Revelation is perhaps not the easiest book in the Bible, but it's not as difficult as we think.

[1 : 48] Remember, the Bible is a people's book. The Bible is written for every single one of us. It's not for experts to stand up in a podium and to explain it and unpack it to people as if there was some priestly caste who is understanding, and the ordinary people can't really get it.

The Bible is a book for every single person. And there, of course, there's symbolism in the Bible. We'll see symbolism in the verses we're going to read. But at the end of the day, it's not as difficult as it appears.

And so if you were to have an image here about Revelation chapter 5, indeed the whole of Revelation, you would ask the question, what is behind the locked door?

Or what is behind the curtain? Because the word Revelation means an unveiling. So what we have is you imagine something and it's mysterious. And someone says, look, you go into that room, but don't look behind the curtain, because there are mysteries behind the curtain.

And so look at the Revelation as the unveiling, the opening of the curtain to see what is behind it. Now remember also that whenever we read the Bible, and again we see this tonight when we look at Esther, there is really one story in the Bible, and that's the story of Jesus.

[3 : 15] And the story of how Jesus came to save, and that runs from Genesis right on to Revelation. How he came on a great rescue mission. And so the hero of the Bible, the hero of the day, the hero of the hour is always the Lord Jesus.

And of course he is featured very much in this chapter. He is seen there in two figures. He is seen there as a lion. We see that, of course, in verse 5. And he's seen also as the lamb.

There was a 13th century Italian philosopher known as Bonaventure. And someone, a student, said to Bonaventure, why don't people love God more?

And his reply was, they don't love him because they don't know him. It's interesting, isn't it? They don't love him because they don't know him.

That's true very much here in the Western Isles. The church-going population of the Western Isles is, I think, the highest in the United Kingdom at something like 10%, but 90% of folk don't appear to know him or don't appear to even care.

[4 : 37] And I think a lot of the problem is that folk just don't know him. They don't know about him. They don't know what he is like. And sometimes we've not really helped. And so what I want to do here is look at this passage.

And the key word in the passage is, if you wanted one key word in the passage, it is the word worthy. Dominates it. You see it there in verse 2. You see it in verse 9.

You see it in verse 12. It's the theme of the song of the angels in verse 9. And worthy are you to take the scroll and open its seals. Worthy. And again, we'll unpack that in a wee while, God willing.

But this morning, as we look at the passage, I just want us to notice, strangely enough, three things. The first thing we notice there is the scroll. And that kind of dominates the chapter, isn't it?

The scroll. What do we notice about the scroll? Well, verse 1 and verse 3, we notice that the scroll is sealed. And so you're always wondering, what's inside a sealed scroll?

[5 : 44] Well, we've got to ask ourselves, what exactly is this scroll? Verse 1 says it's got writing on it. There's writing on it on both sides.

The idea there is it's packed with information. It's packed with writing. And there's lots of ideas, lots of theories about what actually is written on the scroll.

Some folks say it's prophecies are written on the scroll. There's another interesting view. It's the last will and testimony. Some folks say it's the last will and testimony of Jesus.

That's what's written on the scroll. And so the picture is it's like the reading of a will. What has Jesus left for the church? And it's in the scroll.

And people are really keen to open the scroll. So it could be prophecies. One view is it's the last will and testimony of Jesus. And another view, and I think this is probably the most accurate, is everything's in the scroll.

[6 : 46] The history of the world is in the scroll. The future is in the scroll. The purposes and plan of God are in the scroll. Wouldn't you like to know the purposes and plan of God?

Well, sometimes it's a blessing not to know the purposes and plan of God. Have that picture in your mind that that's what the scroll is. It is the purposes and plan of God for everything.

It's not the first time we see the scroll. You see the scroll in Exodus chapter 2. The same book.

Sorry, Ezekiel. Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 10. Exact same book. It says, And both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.

It's seen in Psalm 139. Within the volume of the book, it written as of me. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to pass.

And of course, in an ancient tradition, a book was often sealed after the contents were witnessed by seven people. And so it's the future of humanity here.

[7 : 55] And it is jaw-dropping. Because when the book is opened, chapter 8 verse 1, it says that there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

But there's a problem, isn't there? You've got this book. You've got this scroll. And it's got everything in it.

It's like a safe. But nobody knows the combination. And you see here, there, the problem with scroll. In verse 2, I ask the question, Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals? You've got the picture there, haven't you? The scroll.

I see two concepts there, don't you? The first concept I see is the concept of frustration. Who is able to open the scroll?

[8 : 56] It's like you know something is there. Now, in the idiom of the day, there's something bigger going on here. Because not only did the person who opened the scroll see its contents, but actually, in the context here, the person who opened the scroll didn't just read it, but they enacted it.

They made it happen. So, this stuff in the scroll wasn't going to happen. Good things, bad things, all these things, the future of humanity, the history of the world, everything wasn't able to get going unless someone opened the scroll.

The promise of the new heavens and the new earth. Although the book of Revelation is not all about the future, where it is somewhat about the future. That this world is not all there is to be.

That there is a new creation. That there is a new day coming. That there is an end to all the tears.

That there is an end to all the pain. That there is an end to all the frustration.

That this valley of tears is not determinist. But that there will be a glorious new creation. But there is nobody able to enact it.

[10 : 16] Because nobody can open the scrolls. And the book was in the hand of a man on a throne. And he is encircled by a rainbow.

Isn't he? And the rainbow there, don't you just love rainbows? I don't know about you, but my heart sings when I see a rainbow.

Because it speaks to me about promise. It speaks to me about God and the throne. It speaks to me about a God who said, I am with you. I will never leave you.

I'm the promise keeper. And from the throne, yes, it's surrounded by a rainbow and there's flashes of thunder.

That's what God is. God is a God of awe, of majesty, of wonder. But there's a frustration here, isn't there?

[11 : 20] That's the first concept, it's frustration. The second concept is what I've called worthiness. They weren't looking for a powerful person.

Don't we today have world leaders who talk about power? They boast about power. My aircraft carrier is bigger than yours.

My army is bigger than your army. I am the emperor. What I say goes. Power. And it's seen there in the world stage.

It's seen also in your office. It's seen also in your home. Power. And everybody is looking for power. But it's not a powerful person who opens a scroll.

This is how world politics, this is how domestic politics gets it all wrong. Power is useless in the kingdom of God. Power is also useless in the way the universe works.

[12 : 27] We're not looking for a man or woman of power. Revelation chapter 5 is looking for someone of worthiness. Who is worthy?

Not a person who's powerful, but a person who is good. Godly. Humble.

Not a person who sees himself as Jesus or even a universal doctor. But someone who sees himself as nothing.

the power of goodness. So the question goes out again.

Who is worthy? You look in the world situation through history and through time, who's worthy?

[13 : 29] Is there a worthy politician? You see great humanitarians. You know, we've seen them in the past. Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, great humanitarians, wonderful people.

The world leaders. Who's good? Is there one good figure for maybe the five of you who like Lord of the Rings?

Who is able to destroy the ring? That that ring, that malevolent thing that brings misery into the world is not a symbol of sin.

It's not a symbol of transgression. That misery thing that brings rottenness into the core of everything in the world. Who is able to destroy the ring?

Nobody. Verse 3, he's in despair. No one in heaven or in earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it.

[14 : 35] Verse 4, and I began to weep loudly. That brings out the original, snorting, wailing like an animal and inconsolable grief. And if you have a sensitive conscience, that's how you'll feel just now whenever you watch the news.

There are folk near to me who just can't watch the news anymore. It literally triggers an emotion of grief. Where can we go? We're just lost. We need a Messiah.

Don't we? These islands need a Messiah. Our nation needs a Messiah. There are elections coming up and folk are saying, yeah, we are the people who will sort this and sort that and sort the others.

Can't even get off a ferry in five minutes. The world's in a mess. We need a Messiah.

And so what do we see in the passage? We see a scroll, don't we? And we're asking this question, we need a Messiah. Messiah. Enter the Lamb.

[15 : 58] Point one, the scroll. Point two, the Lamb. There's something dramatic happens here. Look at verse five. I love the language of verse five.

It's very military, isn't it? Weep no more and behold the lion of the tribe of Judah. The root of David has conquered so that he can open the scrolls.

And there's this image of a lion, an image of power, the king of the jungle, invincibility. You've seen a lion's jaws, how it can just consume a wildebeest.

A lion is at the top of the eating hierarchy. Lions eat people, so there's this image of power. And Jesus is that lion, isn't he?

He is the one who is of the tribe of Judah. He is the one of the root of David. People talk about Jesus, gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Yes, he is. But he's also lying.

[16 : 58] He's also all-consuming. He's also powerful. Folks say they don't know about Jesus. Do they know about the Jesus who is not some sort of leftover hippie from the 60s?

Someone who just floats about being nice to everyone? No. But there's more to Jesus than the lion is of Jesus.

The lion is a lamb. Looking for a lion, finding a lamb. That could be the metaphor for where we are in Stornoway today.

That could be a metaphor of where we are in Scotland, in the United Kingdom. We're looking for a lion. But he sent a lamb.

What do we notice about a lamb? Well, one or two things. We notice weakness, don't we? This reveals the values of the Kingdom.

[18 : 02] Strength is through weakness. Strength is through weakness. If you watch the major world powers, it's almost a comedy show, isn't it?

Let's take Vladimir Putin. You ever seen his table? You need binoculars to see the guy at the other end.

It's the biggest table I've ever seen in the world. So you've got little Vlad at one end of this huge table. It's the optics of power, isn't it?

the optics of power, the optics of power, and then of course we have the president with Air Force One. Invincible world power.

I live in Edinburgh when the royals are in town. You always know the royals are in town. There's a cavalcade, the cars are there, the motorcycle outriders, the cars with the flashing blue lights. It's the royals, there's power, there is power here.

[19 : 08] But here is the power of the Lamb. Folk talk about soft diplomacy, don't they?

Soft power. We are Christians, we are people, men and women of the kingdom. And this is where our power comes from.

And the power of the kingdom is inverse. isn't it? It's the power of gentleness, it's the power of opposites, that the way up is the way down, that those who have less have more, that those who have nothing have everything.

It's the mathematics of the kingdom. And the paradox is things are not as they seem. Things are not as they seem.

Here we are in this building. It's a simple building, traditional Presbyterian church, plain building.

[20 : 19] And yet there's more power in here this morning, isn't there, than Downing Street, Holyrood, the Kremlin and the White House combined. Isn't there?

power. But it's a quiet power. And that's the way God most often works. Again, we'll see a little bit of that tonight in Esther.

God doesn't just work with the dramatic signs and wonders. He works powerfully. Have you ever heard the moon operating in the tide?

Have you? No, it's silent. And yet the seas rise and the seas fall.

That's power. The lamb is gentle, the lamb is silent, the lamb is meek. We see weakness, but also we see sacrifice, verse 6.

[21 : 24] This is a weird lamb. Verse 6, I saw a lamb standing as though it had been slain. You know, the metaphors are bizarre. Not only is the Messiah, not only is the one who is able to open the scrolls a weak lamb, he's a dead lamb.

It looks as if he's been slain. Now, again, the gospel and grammar as they say, I saw a lamb standing as though it had been slain.

There's an ambiguity there. Is it dead? Is it alive? Well, it looks as though it had been slain, but, you know, it's alive. who does that remind you of?

That reminds you of Jesus and resurrection. He looks as if he's been slain, but he is alive. And this is us right into the heart of our faith.

The kernel of the kernel, the very epicenter of the Christian faith. What is the center of the gospel? What is the center of the church?

[22 : 40] It's not all the stuff. It's not all the accoutrements. It's not all the outward stuff in the church. And that's what I would love to do, and that's what I try and do from day to day.

Get folk to the kernel of the gospel, and the kernel of the gospel is dear dying lamb, thy precious blood shall never lose its power till all the ransomed church of God be saved and sin no more.

This is a foolish message. You say to it, what is the answer to the world's ills?

A dying lamb who was sacrificed for our sin. Look at how all the faith traditions view God.

I was in India recently, and it was dominated by the Hindu faith, and there are shops that sell idols, and they're all there, and they all look very idly.

[24 : 02] The gods of human invention are either too bizarre and remote and up there and unattainable, or they're too human.

this is not an avatar, this is a flesh and blood god, this is a god. We've seen the scroll, we've seen a lamb.

Thirdly, what are the implications? The question we may ask is, so what? Who cares? here we are, a few folk gathered here in this building, Kenneth Street.

You go home and someone says, oh, what was he on about today? Well, he spoke about a lamb. What else did he speak about?

Spoke about gentleness, spoke about sacrifice, a lamb who died for our sins. So what? I think this passage speaks, and this is the application for today, there's several levels of application.

[25 : 21] The first, the passage to me speaks in terms of reversals. Number one, there's a reversal of power. Look at verse six. Here we move into symbolism.

The lamb looking as if it had been slain with seven horns and seven eyes. Well, you know, symbolism 101 tells you that seven is the number of perfection. Every school girl knows that. Seven is the word of perfection. So when you've got seven horns, horn is a symbol of power. Again, that's not a complex image.

The eyes, wisdom. Zechariah speaks of the seven eyes of the Lord which range throughout the earth. Stop right there. Stop right there.

The lamb has seven horns. He's all powerful. And he's got seven eyes. He sees everything. Again, the present tense is used of the power and not the visibility of the lamb but the vision of the lamb that he can see absolutely everything.

[26 : 29] think for a moment of the people to whom the book of revelation was written. It wasn't written to a group of comfortable Christians in an island, seated in nice padded pews in a warm building like us.

the book of revelation was written by two people who perhaps the very next day they would have been fed to the lions.

It was written to the persecuted church. It was written to people who feared the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was tyrannical. It was going to massacre people. That's who it was written to.

Not folk in a tidy situation like us but folk who in fear of their lives. Suffering persecution for their faith. And so much of this was behind closed doors.

See that again? Closed doors, veil. And they wondered, did anyone ever notice?

[27 : 45] Did you ever think that? Does anybody ever notice? I heard in the news two days ago, Nigeria. The persecution of Christians in Nigeria is going through the roof and only recently has it begun to be spoken about.

I read this morning, that's an incredible statistic, 365 million Christians, one in seven Christians in the world, one in seven, 365 million are being persecuted for their faith.

who cares? Who knows? Who knows? He sees. In verse seven, he took the scroll from a hand.

Didn't he? Verse seven says that. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. the will of the father and son are one. Do you feel you're alone?

Churches can feel isolating places at times, don't they? you've got the inner people, you've got the circle, the in crowd, but you're not one of the in crowd.

[29 : 08] You're just sitting there in the pew. Does anybody know I'm here? Does anybody care? care? He cares.

There's a Zulu greeting. Not used it often myself, but there's a Zulu greeting and it's sawabona.

Sawabona. It means, if there are any Zulu speakers here, they'll correct my pronunciation, it simply means, I see you. I see you.

quiet, marginal person suffering without anybody knowing your story. The lamb in the midst of the throne sees you.

So there's a reversal of status here. Look at what the passage says. These saints have been despised for many years, not many noble, not many wise, but he sees you.

[30 : 15] verse 8. Isn't that intriguing? They fell down before the lamb, each one holding a harp and a golden bow full of the incense.

Again, we know what the incense is, which are the prayers of the saints. the prayers of the saints.

And the prayers are answered. The worthiness is the scene. And notice what the worthiness is. The worthiness arose from his death, slain with that blood.

Verse 2, there was silence in heaven. Verse 9, there's this chorus of wonder of praise. There's a reversal of status.

But then thirdly and finally, there's a reversal of exclusivism. Look at verse 9. Whether you are 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.

[31 : 27] the true internationalism of the church. One of my big things, I pray for our own denomination, is it will become bigger, it will become poorer, and it will become darker.

Bigger, poorer, darker. What does that mean? Bigger means that we want to see our churches grow and expand. We want to see people come to faith, not just splitting churches and forming new churches, not just doing that constantly, it gets a bit weary, but people who are non-believers seeing the beauty of Jesus, seeing the beauty of Jesus and running to him and filling up the churches that we have, planting new churches, bigger, also poorer, that we have folk from every socio-economic unit, that we've got folk from housing schemes, that we've got folk from all over as well, darker for ethnic diversity.

And that's the promise. You ransom people from every tribe and language and people and nation, whoever you are in this island. And one of the great things about the highlands and islands, whether not everyone sees it as great, but I certainly see it as great, is the diversity of our religions, people who come from every single area.

And the wonderful thing is that they're welcome in the church of God. Someone once said to me, what's your name?

I said, David Meredith. And the reply was, Meredith, what sort of a name is that? I'm sorry I wasn't a McLeod or a Nicholson or a McKenzie or a Smith or a Bacani.

[33 : 26] Every tribe and language and people and nations folk with the weirdest names and folk from every complexity purchased.

We look for the internationalism of the church. So what do we have here? Let's come into land. We've got the world in a mess. And how can I put it simply? We've got a Messiah. A Messiah who can change the world and change your heart and change your life.

What do we have here? Some folks say it's too good to be true. It is true. Folks, it's true.

The gospel's true. Jesus is the lamb. Jesus is the one who says trust in me, lean in me. Jesus is the one who says yes, I have died, but I've died for you so that you would not die.

[34 : 39] And I'm going to bring a new creation. I'm going to make this world new. There's going to be a freedom from all sin, freedom from all illness, freedom from all division, freedom from everything.

The four living creatures, what did they do? verse 14. They said Amen. And the elders fell and worshipped him.

We're Lewis folk. We don't say Amen out loud. We say in here. Sing it out or keep it in. It doesn't matter.

Our response this morning should be Amen. And we fall down and worship him.

Father, we thank you for your word, for its power, and the power of God unto salvation. Help us today to rejoice in the Lamb and to see him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

[35 : 59] Amen. we sing in Psalm 34 from the Scottish Psalter, page 247.

Scottish Psalter is Psalm 34 from verse 8. The tune is Denfield.

O taste and see that God is good, who trusts in him is blessed. Fear God has saints, none that in fear shall be with want oppressed. Singing to verse 15, to God's praise, O taste and see that God is good.

Standing need to sing. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.

[37 : 47] Thank you. Thank you.

And now may the grace of Lord Jesus, the love of God the Father, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be upon us all now and forever. Amen.

Thank you.

Thank you.