

The Lord of History

Revelation 5

That's what's going on in Heaven right now. Here? Not so much. What a week. One black man was killed in Baton Rouge and another near Minneapolis, both at the hands of policemen. Several policemen were killed by a black gunman in Dallas, who admitted that he wanted to kill white people. And then I read about a man in my own home town of Valdosta, Georgia, who called 911 just so that he could shoot the policeman who responded to the call. Is there any hope for racial reconciliation, or even for civic safety?

But things aren't much better in the world as a whole. ISIS thugs continue to rampage through the Middle East, and inspire terrorists much closer to home, such as the one who shot up an Orlando nightclub. Everywhere you look, human history seems to have taken a wrong turn.

Can anyone do anything about any of this? Apparently very few Americans think so. Both of the major party candidates have sky-high negative approval ratings. And with the Supreme Court hopelessly deadlocked and the Presidency and the Congress in the hands of different parties, there's not much reason to hope for political change within the Federal government. And we face similar paralysis at the state and local levels, as tight budgets stymie even the most optimistic and creative of our leaders. What can we do about any of this?

And so we turn to today's passage for some relief, for a fresh perspective as we turn our eyes from the total mess this world has become to the overwhelming power and glory of God that John sees in his heavenly vision. And we expect to find relief. And yet in verse 4, we find John weeping just as if he had been reading about the shootings in Baton Rouge or Dallas. So, why is John so sad because the book in God's hand couldn't be opened? How could he have known what was in it if he hadn't read it?

Perhaps John's sorrow came from his knowledge of other similar books that are described in the Old Testament. Ezekiel describes a book is also in someone's hand, and there is writing "within and without," in other words, the scroll has writing on both sides. That scroll was intended for a rebellious people that has sinned against God. Those people were called impudent children and stiffhearted. The scroll Ezekiel describes is a scroll of warning.

Or perhaps John was thinking about Isaiah chapter 29, where God says that the vision He has given Isaiah is like a book that is sealed. He says that the word He gives to Isaiah is as

incomprehensible to His people as if He gave a book to an illiterate man. Why? Because the people of God have removed their hearts from the Lord, and they are following their own ways.

And so, because of his knowledge of the Old Testament, perhaps when John sees the sealed book with writing on both sides, he can judge it by its cover. And so he weeps because he recognizes it as a book of judgment on the stubborn, rebellious people of God.

And of course John is right about the contents of the scroll, the contents of which make up much of the rest of the Book of Revelation. If there was ever a book of warning and of judgment, in the whole Bible, this is it. It is a sobering prospect for our own culture, especially in an age such as this, to contemplate the coming of Christ, especially for those not living in obedience to Him. No wonder John is so sad when he sees that book – he knows what's coming.

But John might also be sad because of what else he knows about those two scrolls in Isaiah and Ezekiel. For each of those prophets did more than simply announce judgment on God's people. They also warned God's people. They also urged God's people to repent. And they also announced grace for those who would turn away from their sins. The scrolls thus contain not only the death sentence on sin. They also contain the promise of pardon. They tell God's people how to avoid the disaster that awaits them.

And so when we look at the mess we've made of our society, and the mess we've made of our own lives, we need to shed some tears like John does, tears of repentance. Sure, it's easy to read the headlines and blame everyone else for the problems in our world, but we also need to acknowledge our own rebelliousness, our own sin, our own resistance to God's will, our own uncleanness. We need to look in the mirror of scripture and see ourselves as we really are. We need to hear the judgment that is written on that scroll. We need to see our sin.

For remember that sin is not so much an activity – it is a condition. Sin is the state of being turned away from God and toward anything else, especially the self.

And so the very scene in God's throne room condemns us, does it not? Look at all these angels and elders and cherubim. Where is the focus of their attention? Who is the object of all their adoration?

Are they looking for blessing and honor and glory and power for themselves? Like all too many human politicians, like all too many of us, do they think they themselves deserve power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing? No, they haven't

a thought in their minds except Christ. They haven't a care in their hearts except that He receive all the glory that is His due. They are completely self-forgetful, totally in love with Jesus. That's what real worship is all about.

I don't know about you, but it would be hard for me to enter wholeheartedly into that sort of worship today, and not just because because I've been worrying about all the bad news we've had this week. No, the fact is that I have been focused more on myself and my needs than I have been focused on Christ. I have mainly wanted blessings and power and strength and wisdom for myself and my loved ones. Even my reactions to the news of the week have been more focused on the needs of the bereaved and the systemic changes our society needs in order to become safer and more just.

So what do I do? I know I need to read the words on that scroll. I know I need to have my heart convicted of sin. I know I need to worship Christ. And I know that if I truly worship Him, focusing my whole heart and mind on Him, that all the problems of our society, all the problems of our individual lives will fall into proper perspective. I know all that. But sin remains in my heart. The scroll remains sealed.

And the sobering truth is that none of us can possibly open that book. It doesn't matter how strong you are. The strong angel with the loud voice couldn't open it – do you think any mere human being could?

And it doesn't matter how good you think you are – none of those cherubim, none of those elders with their white robes, none of the angels could open the book. None of them are stained with sin, and yet none of them are worthy.

Only Christ, when He steps onto the scene, is found worthy to open the book and reveal the meaning of the past, present, and future. For only Christ is the Lord of History.

But why is that? Can He open the seals because of His might? The Lamb is said to have seven horns, a symbol of perfect or complete power. Is He worthy because of His wisdom? The Lamb is said to have seven eyes, a symbol of perfect all-seeing knowledge. But neither of those are the reason that Jesus alone can open the scroll.

Verse 9 tells us that it is because the Lamb was slain that He is worthy to take the book and open its seals. Now, we know about the salvation that we have gained from Christ's death on the cross. But why does His crucifixion make Him alone worthy to reveal the future? Why

does His death make Him the Lord of History? Why does His death make Him able to reveal judgment and blessing?

To understand this, we have to go back to the very beginning. God told Adam and Eve that they were to have children, to multiply and fill every corner of the earth with little images of God. Adam's children were supposed to rule the earth as kings. They were supposed to worship God, focusing their lives on Him as priests. That was supposed to be the history of the human race.

But when Adam sinned, it is as if history came to a halt. God's plans seemed to be thwarted. Instead of accomplishing God's plan, Adam decided to go his own way. Instead of filling the earth with the knowledge of God, Adam filled the earth with rebellion and death. The history that was being written, wasn't the one God wanted.

And so in order for human history to continue, in order for God's original purpose to be fulfilled, something would have to be done about sin and death. Yes, there were other perfect creatures that God had created, like angels and cherubim. But they couldn't do anything about man's sinfulness. For God's plans to be fulfilled, for human history to move forward, sin and death would have to be conquered.

But God couldn't just ignore the death sentence imposed on mankind. God couldn't go back on His word, not least because rebellion against God is in fact worthy of death. It wasn't possible for mankind to avoid the death penalty we all so richly deserve. Instead, for the history of man to move forward, mankind would somehow have to go through death.

And so yes, Christ is the Lion of Judah. Yes He is the Son of David, the Messiah, the King of Kings. Yes, He is the Son of Man, approaching the Throne of the Ancient of Days, receiving an everlasting dominion which shall never be destroyed.

But He reigns as Lord of History because He is the slain Lamb. He is the Son of Man – truly man, and so He can take upon Himself the penalty due to other men. He is truly God, and so His death on the cross is sufficient to pay for the sins and crimes of all other men, past, present and future. He is the one of the flock Who lays down His life that the others might live. He is the slain Lamb, who is worthy to open the book, to make sense out of all of this, and to make it right.

But how does Christ's cross connect to our own lives? What do we have to do to get sin out of our lives? What do I have to do to worship the way Christ deserves and the way God demands?

Christian, you are not the Lord of History. You are not the Lord of your life. You are not the One Who has made you a king and a priest. You are not the redeemer. You can't open the scroll. You can't judge yourself and you can't save yourself.

So quit trying. The very thing you need to do is nothing at all. Just turn away from your problems, from your sins, from yourself. Turn and do what everyone else in Heaven is doing right now – just look at Jesus.

He is the Lord of History, who has seven eyes. He can make sense out of everything that has ever happened in your life. He knows everything that is happening in our world, everything that is happening in your life right now. And He knows everything that will happen to You.

He has read the book of the future – He wrote the book. Everything happens according to His plan. Everything happens to make Christians more like Him. If you see sin in your life, it is because He has brought it to your attention. And He will cleanse you of it, sooner or later.

He is the Lion of Judah, who has seven horns. He is the Son of Man, and the Ancient of Days has given Him all authority, dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations and languages should serve Him. No matter what happens to worldly societies or states, His kingdom will never be destroyed.

There is no power greater than His. There is no social ill that He cannot correct, no personal problem that He cannot solve. There is no sin, however deeply rooted, that He can't pull out of your life. There is no addiction, however strong, that He cannot break. There is no relationship, however splintered, that He cannot heal.

He is your Redeemer – the Lamb slain that God's wrath might pass over you, the offering made that your sins might be washed away. Think of the price He paid that you might become His own. No engagement ring was ever so costly. No bride was ever so cherished.

There is no sin that He does not long to forgive. He knows how cold our hearts are. He knows how divided our loyalties are. He knows about all those other things and other people to which we give our first love. He knows how unfaithful we are to Him. He knew all that before He chose us. And yet He loved us enough to die for sinners like us anyway.

No, we can't understand what's going on in the world today. We can't understand what's going on in our lives. And we can't understand the kind of love God has for us. But how can we respond to such love? We are called to trust Him, not only to save us but to rule over us. And we are called to worship, to forget ourselves in love and adoration of God. No, we will not sing as joyfully or with as much enthusiasm as we should. No, we will not pray with as much undivided devotion as we should. We can't – we still have the remnants of sin within us.

But Christ loves sinners like us anyway. He has made us a kingdom of priests nevertheless. He calls us to worship Him even though our voices are squeaky and our hearts are sinful. And to the extent that we trust Him, to the extent that we worship Him, to the extent that we focus our eyes and our hearts and our minds on Him, He is pleased.

So let us join the angels and the elders and the cherubim and all the heavenly host, as we crown our Lord and King with our praise.