

Sermon: To God, and the Lamb, be praise

Revelation 5:1-14

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Today and the coming two weeks we will study some of the visions of the Apostle John, penned down by him in the last book of the Bible, called Revelation. Unlike some misguided modern prophets, we will not try to calculate the date of the return of Jesus Christ. We will not look at the book of Revelation as if it contains a sort of schedule of future events as if it is a timetable of the national railways.

The passage we have read today, Revelation 5, takes us straight into the throne hall of heaven. In the previous chapter, John already gave us a glimpse into this management room of the universe. God sits on the throne. Our Father rules the universe. That is very comforting for his children here on earth.

In the midst of our joys and depressions we know: God in is charge. John saw 24 elders and 4 angelic beings eternally worship God as the almighty creator of all things. These 24 elders may represent God's redeemed people from all nations; the angelic beings are like a guard of honor, around the throne of God. And all worship him.

SCROLL

As in a movie, John then zooms in on the right hand of God; in his hand he holds a scroll. An angel shouts and asks: 'Who is worthy to take the scroll and open it?' (Rev 5:1). John begins to weep loudly. No one comes to open the scroll. What is this scroll? What is happening here?

The Old Testament prophet Daniel also spoke of a scroll that was sealed. Is John thinking of that scroll? Daniel described how the people of God were in great danger, but then the archangel Michael comes to the aid of the people of God. Daniel 12:1-4 says

At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. [...] You, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end.

The people John writes to, in his book of Revelation, are also in great danger. They were persecuted pretty badly. Read Rev 2 and 3 at home, to see the problems the church was facing at that time. John promises salvation to those Christians, just as Daniel wrote: 'At that time, your

people – everyone whose name is written in the book – will be delivered' (Dan 12:1b). Daniel has to seal the scroll till the time of the end.

And now John sees the book – still sealed. As if it is an official notary act. Only the right person is allowed to open it. In Roman times, this was the way to write a testament. Testaments were often sealed with many seals.

Was the scroll that John saw an Act of Redemption? In 1962, near Jericho a scroll was found from the year 335 before Christ. It was sealed with seven seals, and it contained the official act of a Samaritan who bought a Jewish slave. Is the scroll in the hand of God the official act of the redemption of his people in slavery?

In those days, when a new king was installed, often he would receive a scroll that described the extent of his power, with a focus on the people that lived in his realm and that were subject to him. Is the scroll in the hand of God the promise that a new king will take his power over the earth?

What is at stake with the scroll in the hand of God? Is it about the salvation of his people from their life of slavery on earth? Is it about a new king to take his reign? Is it about the inheritance of the children of God? I think it could be all this.

Robert Mounce, in his commentary on the Book of Revelation, speaks of the 'Scroll of Destiny'. Later in the book of Revelation it becomes clear, that the unwinding of the scroll, the breaking of the seals, sets Gods final salvation of the world in motion. No wonder, when no one takes action, John cries loudly. Will the world never change? Will it always be as it is? Will our problems and sorrows never end?

LAMB OF GOD

But then one of the elders knocks John on the shoulder:

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. (Rev 5:5)

The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, he is our Lord Jesus Christ, already predicted in the very first book in the Bible, in Genesis 49. The mighty lion of Judah is able to open the scroll!

When John looks for the mighty lion, what does he see in between the elders and the angels? A lamb! A lamb looking as if it had been slain!

Even in heaven, after his ascension, Jesus still bears the marks of his death. Even in eternity he bears the scars of the nails in his hands and feet. When he returned to heaven, he brought something new into God: humanness. That is why God can even today empathize with your sufferings and problems.

John sees how the Lamb takes the scroll out of God's hand. At that point, the elders in heaven, and the four other beings, prostrate before the Lamb. Exactly as they did earlier, as described in Revelation 4, before God the Creator. They worship the Lamb in the same way. In heaven itself Jesus is worshipped as God. This is not an idea of Nicaea and the early church – it is heavenly truth. He is God!

John describes then how the 24 elders have harps, and golden bowls full of incense. With their harps they sing God's praise, and we also join in with the heavenly choir when we sing. Our praise to God reflects what happens in heaven. With our liturgy we participate in the heavenly liturgy.

The elders in heaven hold the bowls of incense – and John explains that these are the prayers of the saints, *from us*. All prayers of God's church on earth are gathered and mixed with the prayers of the saints in heaven, and rise to God as a sweet aroma. David prayed in one of the Psalms:

Let my prayer be counted as incense for you,
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening
sacrifice. (Psalm 141:2)

Your prayers rise up to God as a sweet odor. Your cry of need to God – that his will be done on earth as in heaven – arrives in the management room of the universe. Nothing escapes from his attention, not even your small needs and requests.

Then the elders and the four beings sing their song of praise.

And they sang a new song, saying,
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,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to
our God,
and they shall reign on the earth. (Rev 5:9-10)

Because the Lamb, our Lord Jesus, bought people from all nations with his own death, He is allowed to open the scroll. This suggests that the scroll indeed contains the names of all who are his, and that it has to do with their destiny. With *our* destiny. He brought us back to God with his life and death.

Yes more, he even made us into a Kingdom and a priesthood. A new people that belongs to him. What was promised to the Israelites at Sinai - you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6) is fulfilled in the establishment of the church through the death of Christ.

We, believers from all nations, are his priests,

- to forever praise God, together with his heavenly host;
- to mediate between God and other people through our prayers;
- to bring the needs of the world to God;
- to bring our own needs to Him.

And we are kings to one day rule over the earth with the King of kings. This suggests that the scroll is also related to the issue of inheritance. Our full destiny is written by God and in the hand of God. Here on earth maybe despised and in trouble, but in reality, in God's heavenly reality, you have been crowned kings and queens by the Lord of heaven and earth.

This sounds like the curriculum vitae of Jesus! Crushed on earth as a lamb, but at the same time – lion of Judah. Many in Israel could not understand this, and they thought that the Old Testament predicted two Messiahs: a suffering one and a victorious one.

John shows: the suffering messiah is the same as the victorious one. The mighty redeemer *is* mighty and *can* redeem, exactly *because* he also suffered.

St Augustine said in one of his sermons: He endured death as a lamb; he devoured it as a lion (*Sermon 375a.1*)

The lamb in heaven is portrayed with seven horns and seven eyes. This is not a tame lamb – more like a mighty ram!

The seven horns point to the total power of Jesus: he is almighty. His seven eyes show that he sees and knows everything: he is all-knowing. These are marks of God himself.

No wonder the beings in heaven worship him as they worship God the Father; Father and Son are fully united in divinity. They get the same praise in heaven *and from us*.

PRAISE TO GOD AND TO THE LAMB

In Revelation 4, God the Creator is praised; in Revelation 5, God the Redeemer is praised. In Revelation 4 we read these words of praise to God *the Creator*:

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being. (Rev 4:11)

In Revelation 5, the Lamb, God *the Redeemer*, is praised and it seems as if the angels in heaven want to even praise him more, if that would be possible:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! (Rev 5:12)

And then, all creatures in heaven and earth sing for God the Father and for God the Son, for the one on the throne and for the Lamb, exactly the same song of worship:

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! (Rev 5:13)

Simon J. Kistemaker, a Reformed theologian, writes:

All intelligent beings in God's created universe sing his praises: the saints and angels in heaven, the birds in the sky, God's people on earth, and all living beings on land and in the sea. The overwhelming chorus of all these voices, in praise to God and to the lamb, defies human imagination.

God is the king of creation who delegated the work of creation and redemption to his son. As God receives tribute from his creatures, so does the Lamb, for he has completed the tasks that God assigned to him. (*New Testament Commentary on Revelation*, p. 213)

We exist for praising God. To speak, to act, to sing to the glory of the Triune God. After the glorious 'Hallelujah' to the Father and the Son, the four beings that guard the throne say: Amen, and the elders – those who represent God's church in heaven and on earth, fall down and worship.

CONCLUSION

What happens to us here on earth is not the final thing. Your name is written in the book of God: we are his priests, his kings. A new heaven and a new earth is our destiny. One day, all things will be perfectly well.

And even today, your prayers do reach the throne of God and of the Lamb. Together with the prayers of all God's saints, they are offered to God in the ongoing heavenly liturgy. Do not doubt the value of your prayers to him. Each word, each sigh of joy or pain is received by him.

So let us, each personally and also we as a congregation, participate in this heavenly liturgy, by living honorably, by serving him, by praying to him and by praising him each day.

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! (Rev 5:13b)

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen