

**“POWER TO OPEN THE SCROLL”**

**I. Introduction**

A. In the book of Revelation, we find a series of highly symbolic visions that the apostle John received while he was living in exile on the island of Patmos.

1. Chapters 4 and 5 form one vision, a vision where John sees a worship service in God’s heavenly sanctuary.
2. Chapter 4 is the first part of this vision, and it focuses upon God seated on his heavenly throne.
3. This image assures a suffering church that God is indeed ruling over all things, regardless of how things appear.
4. Chapter 5 is the second part of this vision, and it assures us that God’s kingdom and purposes will prevail.

B. As we study this passage tonight, I want us to focus upon three elements of John’s vision.

1. First, we will consider the sealed scroll.
2. Second, we will consider the conquering Lamb.
3. And third, we will consider the new song.

**II. The Sealed Scroll (1-4)**

A. The passage begins with John seeing a sealed scroll in the right hand of God as he is seated on his throne.

1. This scroll is a central feature of the rest of the book of Revelation.
2. Chapters 6 through 8 tell us what happens when the seven seals are opened, and the remainder of Revelation is basically a further

elaboration of this.

3. As far as what this scroll symbolizes, there are two Old Testament passages that form the background for this image.
  4. The first is Ezekiel 2 and 3, where the prophet Ezekiel sees a scroll that is filled with words of lamentation and woe on the front and the back.
  5. This scroll was a symbol of the message that Ezekiel was commanded to speak to God's people because of their rebellion against God.
  6. In Ezekiel, the scroll is a symbol of the judgment that will fall upon the wicked and disobedient.
- B. The second Old Testament passage is Daniel 7.
1. In that passage, the prophet Daniel has a vision of God's heavenly courtroom in which the opening up of a scroll brings judgment upon God's enemies and deliverance for his people.
  2. This is very similar to what happens when the scroll in Revelation 5 is opened up in chapters 6 through 8.
  3. The opening of the scroll brings judgment upon the wicked and salvation for those upon whom God has set his seal.
  4. This tells us that the scroll in Revelation 5 is a symbol of God's purpose for history, especially the era of history that the New Testament refers to as "the last days," the time period in between Christ's first coming and his second coming.
  5. The scroll represents God's plan to bring judgment upon this rebellious world and to save those whom he has graciously appointed to eternal life.
- C. Several details about this scroll are worthy of our consideration.

1. The fact that God's plan is symbolized as something that has been written down is surely significant.
  2. This tells us that God's plan is fixed and unchangeable, and that it has an end point.
  3. The events that unfold in the world are serving God's eternal purpose.
  4. He is moving history to its appointed goal.
- D. Another significant detail is that this scroll has writing on both its front and back.
1. This stands out, because ancient scrolls typically only had writing on one side.
  2. The fact that every part of the scroll has writing on it indicates that every single detail that unfolds across history has been set by God.
  3. Nothing is outside of God's control.
  4. Nothing has been left to chance.
  5. God's plan deals with every particular, even down to the sparrows and the hairs on your head.
- E. One other detail worth noting is that the scroll is sealed up with seven seals and can only be opened by one who is "worthy."
1. In the ancient world, scrolls were often sealed like this in order to ensure that the contents were only seen by those who had the authority to open them.
  2. In John's vision, the seals prevented the scroll's contents from being disclosed and put into effect.
  3. This recalls a passage in Daniel 12, where God tells the prophet, "But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the

time of the end.” (v. 4)

4. In other words, God’s plan cannot be revealed and put into effect until the appointed time.
  5. The scroll can only be opened when God sends the one who has the authority to open it.
- F. In Revelation 5, there is nobody in all creation who has the authority to open the scroll.
1. No mere creature can put God’s plan into effect.
  2. Nothing in this world has the power, in and of itself, to advance God’s purposes for history.
  3. Listen to these thoughts from James Ramsey, a 19th century Presbyterian pastor who wrote a fine commentary on Revelation: “Though all the political powers, and the accumulated wisdom of the world, all its wealth and influence of every kind should combine to advance these spiritual interests, they could of themselves accomplish nothing more than the weak, and foolish, and despised things of the world. It is hard for men to be persuaded of this. Yet nothing can be more certain.” [289]
  4. It is folly to depend on any created power to advance the interests of God’s kingdom.
  5. We are not able to build God’s kingdom any more than we are able to save ourselves from God’s just judgment.
  6. In our text, John comes to this realization.
  7. This is why he weeps.
  8. In the words of Vern Poythress, John “weeps because he senses the importance of this scroll (v. 4). The destiny of John, of the church, of the universe itself hangs in the balance over the question of

whether someone can open the scroll.” [108-109]

### III. The Conquering Lamb (5-7)

- A. One of the elders responds to John’s weeping by saying, “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.”
1. Upon hearing such great messianic titles, we would expect to see a mighty figure step onto the scene in the vision, but that is not what John sees.
  2. Instead, he sees a Lamb.
  3. The Lamb is standing and it goes up to take the scroll, so it is alive.
  4. Yet John also says that the Lamb appeared “as though it had been slain.”
  5. Clearly this Lamb is the crucified and risen Christ.
  6. Jesus is the true Passover lamb.
  7. He atoned for our sins by dying upon the cross.
- B. The elder tells John that the Lamb is worthy to open the scroll because he has conquered.
1. In this evil age, there are powerful forces arrayed against God’s kingdom.
  2. Sin, Satan, the world, death — these are the sworn enemies of heaven.
  3. As the Lamb of God, Jesus has overcome them all.
  4. And when we trust in Christ for salvation, we are more than conquerors in him.

- C. Jesus is worthy to open the scroll because by his death and resurrection he has accomplished God's great plan of redemption.
1. The cross and the empty tomb stand at the center of history.
  2. It is because of his death and resurrection that Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.
  3. As Jesus prayed in his great high-priestly prayer in John 17, "you have given [the Son] authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him." (v. 2)
  4. Jesus has the power to ensure that the saving work he has accomplished is applied to the lives of those whom he died to save.
  5. In John's vision, this is symbolized by the fact that the Lamb has "seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth."
  6. This does not mean that there are seven Holy Spirits.
  7. The number seven is symbolic of perfection and fullness in Revelation.
  8. We see something similar to this back in chapter 4, where it says that the seven torches of fire before God's throne are the seven spirits of God.
  9. Those seven flaming torches correspond to the seven lampstands in chapters 1 through 3, which represent Christ's church.
  10. The torches are symbolic of the fact that the Spirit is the church's source of light and life.
- D. Here in chapter 5, the Lamb's seven eyes are symbolic of the Spirit's perfect wisdom as he goes throughout the world to apply Christ's salvation in the lives of the elect.

1. Consider the significance that this has for the church's God-given ministry and mission.
  2. By the Spirit's power, even the most feeble human efforts can produce glorious spiritual results.
  3. This is why the church must always rely upon the Spirit to make her ministry effective.
  4. It is why we should never lose heart when the world seems so unresponsive to the gospel.
  5. It is why you can be confident that your own efforts to edify the body of Christ are not in vain.
- E. On a related note, we should also consider what is said at the end of verse 8.
1. The elders in John's vision hold golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.
  2. The prayers of God's people ascend up to God's throne in heaven like sweet-smelling incense.
  3. This means your prayers for Christ's kingdom are effective.
  4. This is confirmed by what we are told in Revelation 8, where the prayers of the saints are answered in the judgments that God sends upon the earth. (see Rev. 8:3-5)
  5. Do not neglect to pray for the advance of Christ's kingdom.
  6. God uses our prayers to carry out his purposes.

#### IV. The New Song (8-14)

- A. This brings us to the last part of our passage, where the focus is upon the new song that is sung in response to the Lamb's ability to open the seals.

1. The elders and the living creatures and all creation join together in singing this song of praise to the Lamb.
  2. The song is “new” in comparison to the song that was sung back at end of chapter 4.
  3. That song praised God as he sat enthroned over all creation.
  4. This song is addressed to the Lamb in his office as Mediator of the covenant of grace.
  5. The song is new in reference both to its object (which is Christ) and its subject (which is redemption).
  6. The new song could not be sung until Christ completed the work that was assigned to him and ascended to the Father’s right hand.
  7. Here is James Ramsey’s explanation: “not until He approached the open portals of heaven, and its gazing and expectant throng, beholding the ascending conqueror, cried out, ‘Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in;’ not until then... could this song be sung. Since then, however, it has never ceased. It never can cease. Its strains swell with secret joy the heart of every struggling believer here, and its unmingled and rapturous praises must for ever be the theme of those whose conflicts are ended.” [Ramsey, 300]
- B. We need to learn to sing this new song in the here and now if we are going to sing it in heaven.
1. True faith in Christ is expressed in fervent worship of Christ.
  2. We should not underestimate the power of song.
  3. In Acts 16, when Paul and Timothy responded to being thrown in the Philippian jail by singing hymns all through the night, people were converted. (see Acts 16:25-40)



4. When unbelievers see Christians singing their hearts out to God, especially in the face of trial and trouble, they see God's power at work.
- C. We should also remember that singing is a means by which we can stir up our own hearts and the hearts of our fellow believers to worship the Lord.
1. We see this in our text, where the singing of the new song has a ripple-like effect.
  2. At first, the song is sung by the four living creatures (which represent the entire created order) and the twenty-four elders (who represent the church across both the Old and New Testaments).
  3. Then John sees countless angels adding their voices to the song.
  4. Then every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth joins in.
  5. Then the living creatures add their "Amen!", and the elders fall down to worship.
  6. This is a picture of what singing can do in a Christian's life.
  7. Being in the presence of fellow believers and hearing them sing fervent praise to God in the face of their own struggles inspires us to worship God along with them.
  8. One of the great benefits of memorizing theologically rich hymns is that you can sing them to yourself throughout the day.
  9. They can function like mini-sermons to renew your mind and warm your heart.
- D. Notice that the focus of this new song is entirely upon Christ.
1. It celebrates his right to administer his kingdom.

2. It declares that the cross is what makes him worthy to open the scroll.
3. It also emphasizes that Jesus' blood did not merely make salvation possible.
4. It says, "you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God."
5. The ransom price has been paid in full.
6. This means all of the elect will, in God's appointed time, be set free from their slavery to Satan, sin, and death.
7. The all-seeing Holy Spirit has been sent into the world to subdue their hearts to Christ, and he will not fail in his mission.
8. Nothing in all creation can stand against the salvation of those whom Christ has ransomed.
9. All things must work together for their good.

## V. Conclusion

- A. This passage is so rich that it would be impossible to plumb its depths in one sermon.
- B. I want to conclude simply by reading you one more quote from James Ramsey's wonderful commentary.
- C. Listen to how he applies this glorious text to our lives: "'Weep not' in view of the vast difficulties in working out your own salvation. Your strength is small, indeed, it is nothing; your enemies are mighty; your corruptions are strong, and you may seem to be making little or no progress... But the question is not one of the comparative strength of yourself and your enemies; it is only whether you are in Christ, and so resting on His blood, and righteousness, and Spirit... 'Weep not' in comfortless, heart-broken sorrow under the afflictions which may be pressing so heavily upon you... The same hand that was nailed to the

cross unfolds your whole life's daily history, and does it with unerring wisdom, so as to secure the result promised in the everlasting covenant... 'Weep not' in view of the church's sad imperfections, impurities, and backslidings, or of her calamities, and the power and hostility of the world, and the darkness of those dispensations of Providence which seem to remove far distant the period of anticipated triumph... All these... are... part of that vast and wonderful plan which He has chosen, in order to show to all the universe the dreadful malignity of sin, and the infinite glory of redemption in triumphing over it, and saving the church. The power and love of the slain Lamb presides over the whole." [293-294]