

“POWER TO OPEN THE SCROLL”

I. Introduction

- A. As we noted last week, Revelation 4 and 5 introduce the visionary sequence of the seven seals, the opening of which results in terrible judgments being sent upon those who dwell on the earth.
1. In chapter 4, the dominant image is that of God seated on his heavenly throne.
 2. This assures the church that God is ruling over everything that unfolds in this world.
 3. In chapter 5, the dominant image is the figure of the Lamb as the only one who is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals.
 4. This assures us that the kingdom of Satan will be destroyed and that the kingdom of God will prevail.
- B. As we study this passage tonight, I want us to focus upon three things.
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 really just 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. That scroll was a symbol of the message that Ezekiel was commanded to speak to the people of Israel because of their rebellion against God.
 6. In Ezekiel, the scroll is a symbol of the judgment that will come upon the wicked and disobedient.
- B. The second Old Testament passage that forms the backdrop for this scroll is Daniel 7.
1. In that passage, the prophet Daniel has a vision of God's heavenly courtroom in which the opening up of scrolls brings judgment upon God's enemies and deliverance for God's 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 those who have received God's seal on their foreheads are brought safely through that judgment.
 4. In light of the Old Testament background, we can see 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 period of time in between Christ's first coming and his second coming.
 5. The scroll represents God's comprehensive 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. First, 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 the outworking of God's eternal purpose.
 - 4. He is moving history to its appointed goal.

- D. Another important 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 this scroll has writing on it indicates that everything 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. Nothing can be added to God's plan.
 - 6. God's eternal decree deals with every particular, even down to the lifespan of a sparrow and the number of the hairs on your head.

- E. One other detail worth noting is that this 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 saying this, God was telling Daniel that his 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, not even the mighty angel who asks, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?"
 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 a portion of the book of 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 clearly understands this.
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. As John is weeping, one of the elders says to him, "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 these 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 clearly 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 depicted as a lamb because he is the true Passover lamb.
 7. He has atoned for our sins once and for all by offering himself up upon the cross.

- B. The elder tells John that the Lamb is worthy to open the scroll because he has conquered.
1. This brings to mind the phrase, "The one who conquers," in the messages to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3.
 2. As Jesus described the blessings that lie in store for his people in heaven, he repeatedly said that those blessings are for those who conquer.
 3. We are called to be conquerors because we live in an evil age, an age in which powerful forces are arrayed against God's kingdom.
 4. Sin, Satan, the world, death — these are the sworn enemies of heaven.
 5. We could never overcome these enemies by our own strength, but as the Lamb of God, Jesus has overcome them all.
 6. And when we trust in him for our 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. Because of his death and resurrection, Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.
 3. As he 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 that 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. The Lamb’s seven eyes are symbolic of the Spirit’s perfect wisdom as he goes throughout the world to apply Christ’s salvation to the lives of the elect.
 7. Consider the significance that this has for the church’s God-given ministry and mission.
 8. By the Spirit’s power, our weak and imperfect efforts produce glorious spiritual results.
 9. This is why the church must always rely upon the Spirit to make her ministry effective.
 10. It is why we should never lose heart when the world seems so unresponsive to the gospel.
 11. It is why you can be confident that your efforts to build up the body of Christ are not in vain.
- D. 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 Christ’s people ascend up to God’s throne in heaven like sweet-smelling incense.
 3. 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. Prayer is a means of grace.

6. This is why we should not neglect to pray for the advance of Christ's kingdom.
7. 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. But this song is addressed to the Lamb in his office as Mediator of the covenant of grace.
 5. The song is new in reference to its object, which is Christ, and in reference to 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." [300]

- B. We need to learn to sing this new song in this world so that we can robustly sing it in heaven.
1. True faith in Christ is expressed in fervent worship of Christ.
 2. We should not underestimate the power of the Spirit-worked praises of God's people.
 3. In Acts 16, when Paul and Timothy responded to being locked up in the Philippian jail by singing hymns all through the night, it resulted in the salvation of an entire household.
 4. When Christians sing to God with true faith and love, especially in the face of trials and troubles, God's power is put on glorious display.
- 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 worship does 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 struggles inspires us to

worship God along with them.

- D. Notice also 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 ascribes all honor and glory to him.
 4. The song also emphasizes that Jesus' blood did not merely make salvation possible but actually accomplished our salvation.
 5. The angels sing to Jesus, saying, "you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God."
 6. The ransom price has been paid.
 7. Because of this, all of the elect will, in God's appointed time, be set free from their slavery to Satan, sin, and death.
 8. The all-seeing Holy Spirit has been sent into the world to subdue our hearts to Christ, and he will not fail in his mission.
 9. Nothing in all creation can get in the way of the salvation of those whom Christ has ransomed.

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 by reading one more extended quote from James Ramsey's 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]