

“At the Center of the Throne”

Introduction: As we’ve begun to push around the question this fall, why do bad things happen to good people, I’ve mentioned that many who wrestle with this question conclude that the presence of bad things means that God doesn’t exist, or, if he does, that he’s either not powerful enough or loving enough to respond. Revelation 4 and 5 meet these objections head on, revealing God’s almighty power (chapter 4) and God’s incredible love (chapter 5), to a group of Christian churches who were experiencing some fairly bad times at the end of the first century.

These chapters really need to be taken together, and since we only had time for chapter 4 last week, remember that God had opened for John, the overseer of these churches, a “door” into the dimension of heaven; John was given a glimpse of the heavenly throne room, the control center of the universe. There he saw, not only a throne, but someone sitting on it. Revelation 4 wants us to know that there is a God, that he hasn’t gone out for an extended coffee break, and, as the vision reveals, that he is dazzlingly beautiful, merciful and faithful, just and sovereign.

This vision, recall, was given so that John and his suffering churches would have hope and confidence that things were not only as they seemed, that there was another reality that intersected with their own. And here is where we need to pay attention! I’m not sure how you left our discussion last week, but you very well could have concluded that there might really be a throne, and that God might really be on it, and that he might be really powerful. But it still seems as if he’s far removed from your existence and doesn’t seem to care about the things that are happening here. And so you could conclude, as many do when asking the “big questions,” God may be all powerful, but he doesn’t seem to be all loving.

Revelation 5 begs to differ. It reveals that in Jesus, God did leave his heavenly throne room, but not to take an extended coffee break; instead, he brought his coffee with him and entered our existence. It reveals that at the heart of God is the heart of Jesus. And at the heart of Jesus is the surprising power of sacrificial love. So let’s unpack that a bit.

I. Jesus is the one who is worthy to open the scroll

A. Chapter 5 begins with the need for someone to open a scroll which has been sealed with seven seals. What is this scroll all about? Well, like an architect holds in his hand a rolled up design for a building, from what follows in the rest of the Revelation, so God appears to be holding the scroll that contains his design for the redemption of the world, anchored in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and looking forward to his new creation. That it rests in God’s hand is yet another sign of his sovereign control. That it is sealed with seven seals reveals that its contents have been completely protected and no one has altered his intentions. However, only one who has been properly authorized can break the seals, read its contents, and put it all into motion.

B. So a great search is pictured, of all creation, and no one can be found who is worthy of breaking the seals and putting God’s plan into action. It’s a reminder that we, as created beings, can do many things. We can build giant sports stadiums and wrist sized smart phones. We can travel to the moon and tinker with our genetic code. We can write moving poetry and paint stunning portraits. But, because we’re all at some level to blame for what is wrong with the world, and we can’t seem to change ourselves on our own power, we need someone from the outside to come and rescue us from our sin and put the world back into order. John breaks out into weeping when he learns that no one in all of creation could be found who was worthy to do

this. And who can blame him? How would God's kingdom ever come, and his will ever be done, on earth as it is in heaven? Could God's power ever be brought to bear in what happens on earth? Or, is God, though powerful, just going to leave us drowning in our tears? To be sure, it's where a lot of people feel left.

Illustration: According to social observers, one of the main reasons the millennial generation (people roughly age 15-30) gives for either leaving the church or not coming to it in the first place is the declaration that God is somehow in control. It really irks them because they don't see how this could be possible given the tears they see all around them. In other words, if God is all powerful, they've concluded that he's certainly not very loving.

## II. Jesus is the lion who is the lamb

A. But God doesn't leave John, or us, in our tears, for John next hears a voice which tells him, in effect, to dry his tears. He is to dry them because there is one who has the power and wisdom of God, who has triumphed and who can break the seals, open the scroll, and begin to put God's healing, redemptive plan into effect. That one is identified as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and the Root of David. Both of these are OT references to the coming of the Messiah. Judah was the tribe from which the Israelite kings came and was symbolized by a lion (Ge. 49:9). David was the greatest of these warrior kings. He fought like a lion and was the main figure in the family from which the messiah was to descend. When the root comes, Isaiah proclaims, the poor and needy will be cared for, the wicked will be brought to justice, and the "earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:1-10).

B. So what John expects to see is a conquering hero. But when he turns his gaze from the elder who had been speaking to him and looks back to the throne, what he sees is stunning. What he sees actually changes the way we see everything! Instead of a roaring, powerful lion-like figure, he sees that of a little lamb, looking like it had been slain or slaughtered. It is a staggering transformation of images, an oxymoron, really, when two words are combined that don't seem to fit together, like jumbo shrimp, or deafening silence, or simple wedding! Jesus is the lion who is the lamb. He is the hunter and the prey combined. His victory came through death, his power comes through gentleness, and all of it adds up to love coming through sacrifice.

C. Not that Jesus is weak. He is powerful, as the seven horns indicate, and he is wise, as its seven eyes portray. And so Paul, in 1 Corinthians, can call Jesus the power of God and the wisdom of God. But it is through the crucifixion that this power and wisdom are revealed. Jesus is worthy to open the scroll and put God's redemptive plan into effect because, after living a sinless life, he has been slain, giving up his life, in love, for the good of the world. The Lamb triumphs by going to a cross. It overcomes, and reveals almighty power, by sacrificing itself.

## III. Jesus is at the center of the throne.

A. Now, before we pull out some implications of this, notice where Jesus, the Lamb, is seen in this vision: He is standing at the center of the throne. Literally, the word is "in the midst of," and commentators struggle a bit with how this identifies his location. Most conclude that he is somewhere in the middle of the action, somewhere between and among, the throne and the elders and the living creatures, especially because v. 7 seems to indicate that he has to take a few steps to get to the scroll. But I appreciate how the NIV has decided to translate it: "I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne . . ." Given the worship that erupts at the end of the chapter, from the living creatures and the elders, and then the angelic host, and then all of creation, praising the Lamb, it appears as if he's definitely at the center of things. And, later, the throne is described as "the throne of God *and of the Lamb*" (22:3).

B. Yet, how can he be there, if God is already seated on the throne? Is he sitting on his Father's lap?! Remember that this is a vision, communicating through images. So, to see Jesus at the center of the throne is to see Jesus at the very center of the heart of the living, Almighty God. At the heart of God is the heart of Jesus. And at the heart of Jesus is the surprising power of sacrificial love. So what does it all mean, especially as we ask questions about the power and love of God? Above all, it means that God has not remained aloof in his heavenly throne room, sipping his coffee, enjoying his power and ignoring our pain. Instead, he has come to us and suffered with us, instead of us, and for us. Verses 9 and 10 help flesh this out:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.

1. First, as we see Jesus at the center of the throne, we see on him the marks of his having been slain. This reveals that at the center of the universe, at the center of reality, at the center of the heart of God, is one who suffers with us. As the prophet Isaiah put it, when describing the experience the Lamb would have: "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain" (53:3). The vision reveals that the God of power has solidarity with us, that through the experience of the Lamb, he has suffered the "baddest" of the bad things, and so is with us as we suffer.

2. Second, the vision reveals that the Lamb not only suffers with us, he suffered instead of us. He did so with his blood, paying the price for our sin and satisfying the justice of God, "purchasing" us for God in the process. It's as if God has told us what we owe, and then turns around and writes the check himself.

3. Third, and even better yet, though slain, the Lamb is risen, which means that suffering does not have ultimate power over us because the Lamb has suffered for us, conquering death. In so doing, has brought us into his kingdom where we have begun to live now and will continue to live forever, though we won't experience kingdom life in its fullness until Jesus returns.

4. Fourth, having suffered with us, instead of us, and for us, Jesus calls us to reign with him, serving our God. God has made the world in such a way that his plans include us! Though the text makes it sound like such a reign is purely in the future, as the kingdom of God has begun to break into our existence with the death and resurrection of Jesus, so too has our reign begun. What does it look like? It will look like Jesus, who, through his sacrificial love and faithful witness, won the victory. So as we suffer as a part of this world, as we suffer as followers of Jesus, may we maintain a faithful witness, knowing that the way to real life, to real power, to real wisdom, is through the power of sacrificial love, that which is at the heart of the one who sits on the throne. In love, through his surprising power, the one on the throne declares, "Behold, I am making all things new," so that one day every tear will be wiped from our eyes and there will be no more mourning or death or crying or pain for the old order of things will have passed away (21:4-5).