

The Lion and the Lamb

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a nine-part series

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Revelation 5 (NIV)

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" ³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. ⁴ I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. ⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

⁶ Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying:

"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.

¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."

¹¹ Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ¹² In a loud voice they were saying:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and
praise!"

¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea,
and all that is in them, saying:

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

¹⁴ The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

The Lion of Judah. The Lamb of God. John's vision takes a dramatic turn.

We stand with John in the throne room of God where we've witnessed all the company of heaven worshipping the LORD Almighty (Rev. 4). Yet, amidst this worship there comes sadness and tears. The One on the throne holds a scroll that, unlike most papyri, is written on front and back. It is sealed with seven seals, which signifies that the seal is completely and utterly closed, for seven is the number of completion and totality. What does the scroll contain? We are not told. It could be God's plan for creation or it could be the rest of the book. Whatever the scroll contains, there is no one, in all the heavens and the earth, who is worthy to open it and John too weeps.



The Lamb of God

This triumphal depiction of the Lamb of God, *Agnus Dei*, is the most complex of the symbols in the Rose Window. The lamb, which had long been used in sacrificial rites by the Jews, came to represent Jesus Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross.

The standing lamb, holding the banner, with the golden circle around its head represents Christ's sacrifice and his victory over death. Perhaps the New Testament passage that best captures this depiction of the Lamb of God is from Revelation 5. Indeed, this praise of God's worthy Lamb is the closing chorus in Handel's *Messiah*!

Then, one of the twenty-four elders comes to John and tells him that the Lion of Judah is worthy to open the scroll. Thus, we'd expect that John would turn to see a lion, the symbol of power and strength, standing ready to open the scroll.

The Lion

The story of Jacob and his twelve sons is told in the book of Genesis. The sons' families would become the twelve tribes of Israel. One son's tribe would become predominant over the others, that of Judah. Before his death, Jacob speaks to each of his sons about their future. Judah is told that his tribe is like a lion's club. The tribe will hold the ruler's scepter until "he to whom it belongs shall come." David will come from the tribe of Judah, as will Jesus. Thus, the lion becomes the enduring symbol of Judah and Israel, a symbol of strength and sovereignty.

The Lamb

The "Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered" calls on two key OT images. The first is the Passover lamb, whose blood was spread on the doorway of the Hebrews so that the death of the firstborn would pass them by. Of course, Jesus' last meal with his disciples was a Passover meal reshaped around Jesus' body and blood, representing a New Exodus. But the image of the Lamb also evokes Isaiah 53, the story of the suffering servant who would take upon himself the iniquities of us all. A Christian could scarcely read Isaiah 53 and not see in it the story of Jesus' sacrifice.

Yet, when John turns, he doesn't see a lion at all. He sees a lamb. But not a cute, white, leaping little lamb. John sees a lamb standing there as if it had been slaughtered.

This is such a powerful moment in Revelation. John *hears* "Lion" but *sees* "Lamb." The contrast couldn't be more striking.

We think we know what power and might are, but Jesus Christ has revealed that the truth is far from our expectation. It is the Lamb who conquers. Craig Koester writes, "What John *hears* about the Lion recalls promises from the Old Testament, and what he *sees* in the lamb reflects the crucifixion of Christ. Both images point to the same reality. According to the Old Testament, God promised to send a powerful and righteous ruler. These promises are not rejected but fulfilled through the slaughtered yet living Lamb, who is not a hapless victim but a figure of royal strength."

And strong the Lamb certainly is. The Lamb has seven eyes, all-seeing and all-present (see Zechariah 4:10), and seven horns, all-powerful, as horns were ancient symbols of kingly power. In Revelation, there are twenty-eight references to the exalted Lamb. It is the victorious Lamb of

God from the end of the book who stands at the center of our Rose Window.

So, it is the Lamb who takes the scroll from the hand of God, causing all the elders and cherubim to fall down before the Lamb in worship, singing their acknowledgement that the Lamb, and the Lamb alone, is worthy to open the scroll.

Then angels too numerous to count join the elders and the cherubim in their worship of the Lamb. The crescendo presses forward as all the creatures of all the cosmos join in the praise of the one seated on the throne and of the Lamb. Finally, the four living creatures say "Amen!"

How cold a heart it would be that could be unmoved by this scene. Imagine for a moment that you are a Christian who is being persecuted. What would these words say to you? Who is really in control of this world? To whom should every knee bow and tongue confess? Would this not encourage you to persevere and to trust that God and the Lamb will be victorious over the powers that persecute you, even if it doesn't seem that way in the present moment. Remember, John's revelations pull back the curtains of heaven, revealing to you the truth of what is and who is. We shouldn't be surprised that it is this scene around which Handel composed the glorious final chorus in his *Messiah*.

Sacrifice

The Lamb stands there looking as if it had been slaughtered, i.e. sacrificed. Easy to picture, though disturbing at best. Indeed, I've found that few topics are more perplexing and disturbing than the biblical perspective on animal sacrifice. Sure, we can handle talking about sacrifice in the sense of giving something up but all the stuff about blood and animals and death can be very upsetting to many Christians. We want to relegate it to an ancient time and culture that has little to do with us. Yet, unless we confront blood sacrifice, much of the Bible simply won't make sense.

You see, it isn't an overstatement to say that the New Testament is an extended reflection on the meaning of Jesus' death in light of the Jewish scriptures. Why did he die? More to the point, why didn't he save himself? Who was he – really? Was anything accomplished by his horrifying and humiliating death on a Roman cross? What do we really make of this Lamb of God? What does Jesus' death, symbolized by the cross, mean for us?

From the beginning, Jesus' followers used and expanded upon the Jewish imagery of blood sacrifice. God's covenant with the Jews provided several rituals in which the sacrifice of an animal was used to deal with sins in such a way that the people could be restored to right relationship with God and their consciences healed. With Jesus though, all this becomes something new.

Recall that at the beginning of John's Gospel, upon seeing Jesus, John the Baptist exclaims "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Jesus' last week is Passover week. At the Last Supper, sharing the bread and cup set the stage for the shedding of Jesus' body and blood. Like the silent lamb of Isaiah 53:7, Jesus won't even defend himself (John 19:9). The legs of the Passover lamb were to be unbroken (Exodus 12:46); Jesus' legs are not broken by the soldiers (John 19:36).¹ For the writer of Hebrews, Jesus death is the final and perfect sacrifice to which all the OT sacrifices pointed.

The meaning of sacrifice

The first Christians understood that Jesus' character extended upward to encompass God himself and downward to encompass the sacrificial lamb of the Old Testament, giving us this paradox of a lamb who is God and the mystery of God's victory over sin and death being won on a cross – a victory symbolized for us in the center of our Rose Window.

Jesus' followers understood that Jesus' sacrifice, the death of this innocent, was to set the pattern for their own lives. Paul would write about sharing in Christ's sufferings (Philippians 3:10), being given up to death for Jesus' sake (2 Cor 4:11), and bearing one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Richard Hays writes, "Jesus' death is consistently interpreted in the New Testament as an act of self-giving love, and the community is consistently called to take up the cross and follow in the way that his death defines."²

The point is this: our discipleship, our very imitation of Christ, necessarily entails self-giving sacrifice. As God has done for us, in Christ's sacrifice, so we are called to do for others. As God loves us, so we should love others – even when there is a price.

¹ Roman execution squads would often, mercifully, break the legs of those being crucified in order to hasten their death. The broken legs would prevent the person from being able to push themselves up on the cross to keep breathing. Typically, suffocation was the cause of death on a cross.

²from Richard Hays' book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, HarperCollins, 1996. Hays contends that there are three principal images through which the NT ought to be read: community, cross, and creation.

“A man of suffering and acquainted with grief”

Written hundreds of years before Jesus, Isaiah 53 paints a dramatic picture of one who takes upon himself the suffering of us all and in so doing is despised and rejected. Christians, of course, see in this passage a portrait of Jesus Christ, whom we proclaim to the world as the one true God incarnate. What a dramatic claim we make – we proclaim a God who suffers. But what is the real meaning of this for our own suffering? Here is one thought.¹

Who are you? How do you think of yourself? What most defines you, provides your identity? Perhaps it is your role as a mother or son or executive or teacher? Certainly, when we are suffering in grief, illness, or tragedy we are, for a time at least, most defined by that suffering – all else that we are seems to fade into insignificance. Somebody suffering from cancer may find it hard to think of themselves as anything other than a cancer victim.

Yet, Jesus’ own suffering shows us the incomprehensible extent of God’s love for each of us – “God so loved the world that he gave his only son . . .” There is no one for whom I would allow my own son to be crucified. I am simply not capable of loving as God loves. In contrast, even in the most terrible circumstances of our lives, it is God’s concrete love expressed in Jesus’ suffering that grounds our own worth. Those dying of cancer are not first and foremost cancer victims, though they may feel that way at times. They are first and always, God’s beloved.

Each of us is defined by God’s love for us. It is God’s love of us and our knowing that we are loved, that not only sustains us through suffering but enables us to put it behind us, always pressing forward to the future. Just as Jesus’ crucifixion is the concrete expression of God’s love for us, Jesus’ resurrection is the concrete affirmation, indeed fulfillment, of our own eventual freedom from evil and suffering.

¹For more, see David Kelsey’s article, “Imagining Redemption,” in the June 28, 2005 edition of *Christian Century*.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The Lion and the Lamb. Look back over your own life with Jesus, from childhood to now. Which image, Lion or Lamb, best embodies your own image of Jesus? What do you think each of these images is trying to convey to us about Christ? Which seems to be paramount? Why do you think this is? You might take a few minutes to read Isaiah 53 and come back to these questions.
2. I’ve said that Revelation was written to comfort and encourage persecuted Christians. Do you think that this scene does so? If your answer is “yes,” then how would you help another Christian to experience that same encouragement from this passage? If your answer is “no,” I invite you to return to Isaiah 53 and Revelation 5. What is John’s vision saying to you about the person, Jesus, in whom you have placed your faith?
3. We don’t practice animal sacrifice – and God certainly doesn’t want us to start. Any purpose it might have served has been fulfilled in Jesus’ death on the cross. Nonetheless, the language of sacrifice, in the sense of self-giving love, is woven throughout the New Testament.
 - What sacrifices are we called on to make? Do we? What sacrifices do we call on others to make, perhaps on our behalf? What are some examples of selfless sacrifice that we might make? As disciples of Jesus, what barriers stand in the way of our own imitation of Christ? If you are like me, it can be pretty hard sometimes to find the joy in doing without so we can do more for others. Is this your own experience? If so, how do find we such joy?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 11:1-12:28 The final plague and the Passover lamb.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Ezekiel 34 God and the shepherds of Israel.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Isaiah 53 The suffering servant of the Lord</p>	<p>Thursday, Hebrews 10 The old sacrifice is contrasted with the new, the perfect, sacrifice of Jesus Christ.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Peter 3:8-22, 4:12-19 The early Christians were well-acquainted with suffering, even suffering for doing good.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own.
This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.
On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check
www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the Gospel of John

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in room 131 on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.
The class is usually led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org.
Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with
each week's recorded sermon.

There is also an archive of nearly 500 studies at www.scottengle.org
They are posted as easily downloadable pdf files. Your browser can search the
listing for studies on specific books of the Bible or Scripture passages. They are
suitable for individual study and for biblically-oriented small group discussions.
You will also be able to join the Yahoo group (sa_studies) so you can get the Bible
studies e-mailed to you each week.

Sermon Notes
