

Revelation 5:1–10(NRSV)

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals;² and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?”³ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it.

⁴ And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. 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 conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

⁶ Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having 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 the one who was seated on the throne. ⁸ When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ They sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;

¹⁰ you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.”

Revelation 21:1–8 (NRSV)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;

they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;

⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

Three images: Cross. Community. New Creation.

In 1996, Richard Hays, one of the world’s leading scholars on Paul, published *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. It has proved to be one of the most enduring and important works of the last two decades on the subject of New Testament ethics. Hays rightly notes that we can’t simply take all the NT writings and drop them into a “blender” to get a harmonized telling of the story of God’s redemptive work in this world. But we can, he says, identify “key images” that all the NT writings share. Hays further suggests that three focal images can guide our readings and interpretations of the NT authors: *community*, *cross*, and *new creation*. Here is Hays’s summary of each:¹

¹ Hays, Richard. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

*The church is a counterculture **community** of discipleship, and this community is the primary addressee of God's imperatives.* The biblical story focuses on God's design for forming a covenant people. Thus, the primary sphere of moral concern is not the character of the individual but the corporate obedience of the church. . . . The community, in its corporate life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world. . . . Many New Testament texts express different facets of this image: the church is the body of Christ, a temple built of living stones, a city set on a hill, Israel in the wilderness. The coherence of the New Testament's ethical mandate will come into focus only when we understand that mandate in ecclesial terms, when we seek God's will not by asking first, "What should I do," but "What should we do?"

*Jesus' death on a **cross** is the paradigm for faithfulness to God in this world.* The community expresses and experiences the presence of the kingdom of God by participating in "the koinonia of his sufferings" (Phil. 3:10). 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. . . . the New Testament insists that the community as a whole is called to follow in the way of Jesus' suffering. The New Testament writers consistently employ the pattern of the cross precisely to call those who possess power and privilege to surrender it for the sake of the weak (see, e.g., Mark 10:42–45, Rom. 15:1–3, 1 Cor. 8:1–11:1).

The church embodies the power of the resurrection in the midst of a not-yet-redeemed world. Paul's image of "**new creation**" stands here as a shorthand signifier for the dialectical eschatology that runs throughout the New Testament. In the present time, the new creation already appears, but only proleptically [in anticipation]; consequently, we hang in suspense between Jesus' resurrection and Parousia [his return]. "The whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:22–23, adapted from RSV). . . . We can never say—as do the guys in a popular beer commercial—"It doesn't get any better than this," because we know it will; we are, like T. S. Eliot's Magi, "no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation." The church is, in Paul's remarkable phrase, the community of those "upon whom the ends of the ages have met" (1 Cor. 10:11, RH). In Christ, we know that the powers of the old age are doomed, and the new creation is already appearing.

In this Lenten series, we will focus on several NT writings using these images, considering how "community, cross, and new creation" can help us to see how we are to live. These studies will provide background and commentary.

In the throne room of God

When the fourth chapter of Revelation opens, we stand with John in the throne room of God where we witness all the company of heaven worshipping the Lord Almighty. 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, so John begins to cry.

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.

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. (Take a moment and read Isaiah 53:7.) This is one of my favorite moments in all the Bible. 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.”

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!” The crucified Lamb of God has triumphed and now rules.

The Holy City is us!

One of the things that should surprise you most about Revelation is that the holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes to earth, not vice versa. Even more surprising, the city is the “bride adorned for her husband,” i.e. the community of God’s people, aka the church. The story doesn’t end with God’s people being spirited way to some distant spot in the cosmos, but with heaven coming to earth. I am pretty sure this is not how many Christians envision eternity. Don’t we head off to spend eternity in our true home, the “place” we came from? No. That is Plato creeping back into things again. In Revelation, the City of God, the new Jerusalem, the Holy City, comes here! The city, the bride, comes down out of heaven (21:10). N. T. Wright, one of the foremost NT scholars of our day helps us to grasp this crucial aspect of John’s vision:

Heaven and earth, it seems, are not after all poles apart, needing to be separated forever when all the children of heaven have been rescued from this wicked earth. Nor are they simply different ways of looking at the same thing, as would be implied by some kinds of pantheism. No: they are different, radically different; but they are made for each other in the same way (Revelation is suggesting) as male and female. And, when they finally come together, that will be cause for rejoicing in the same way that a wedding is: a creational sign that God’s project is going forwards; that opposite poles within creation are made for union, not competition; that love and not hate have the last word in the universe; that fruitfulness and not sterility is God’s will for creation.

What is promised in this passage, then, is what Isaiah foresaw: a new heaven and a new earth, replacing the old heaven and the old earth, which were bound to decay. This doesn’t mean, as I have stressed throughout, that God will wipe the slate clean and start again. If that were so, there would be no celebration, no conquest of death, no long preparation now at last complete. As the chapter develops, the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, is described lovingly: she is the new Jerusalem promised by the prophets of the Exile, especially Ezekiel. But, unlike in Ezekiel’s vision, where the rebuilt Temple takes eventual center stage, there is no Temple in this city (21:22). The Temple in Jerusalem was always designed, it seems, as a pointer to, and an advance symbol for, the presence of God himself. When the reality is there, the signpost is no longer necessary. As in Romans and 1 Corinthians, the living God will dwell with and among his people, filling the city with his life and love, and pouring out grace and healing in the river of life that flows from the city out to the nations. There is a sign here of the future project that awaits the redeemed, in God’s eventual new world. So far from sitting on clouds playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.²

² Wright, T. (2007). *Surprised by Hope* (116–117). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

So we should never forget that at “The End,” stands not an event or even a place, as wonderfully as that place might be depicted in John’s visions. Standing there is a person, the Lamb, Jesus the Christ. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the substance of our hopes and the embodiment of God’s promises.

Daily Bible Readings

More from Revelation

Monday, Revelation 1 The opening vision of Christ

Tuesday, Revelation 4 & 5 The great throne room vision

Wednesday, Revelation 7 The great multitude of God’s people

Thursday, Revelation 19:1-10 The marriage of the Lamb (Jesus) and his bride (the community)

Friday, Revelation 21 The new heaven and the new earth – New creation!

Saturday, Revelation 21: 1-7 The river of life

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of Matthew’s Gospel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are beginning our study of Genesis this week. It is a great time to join us!

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, “Scott Engle.”

Scott’s 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *The Real Story of the Crusades*

Beginning next week: *Jesus on Every Page*

Video of each week’s class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy