

# *The Lion, the Lamb, the Beasts*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4<sup>th</sup> in a six-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. <sup>2</sup> And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” <sup>3</sup> But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. <sup>4</sup> I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.

<sup>5</sup> 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.”

<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,

and they will reign on the earth.”

<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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!”

<sup>13</sup> 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!”

<sup>14</sup> The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

### *Revelation 13:11–18 (NIV)*

<sup>11</sup> Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. <sup>12</sup> It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. <sup>13</sup> And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. <sup>14</sup> Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. <sup>15</sup> The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. <sup>16</sup> It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, <sup>17</sup> so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.

<sup>18</sup> This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.

*The Lion of Judah. The Lamb of God. The beasts.*

*John's vision takes some dramatic turns.*

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.

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.

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,

### 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.

"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 (Jesus).

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

### A Tapestry

John's visions are literary tapestries. Each vision weaves together quotations from or allusions to the Old Testament with first-century images and references that would be understood by the first-century readers. John's visions are more than simply his attempt to put into words what he experiences.

The throne room visions from Chapters 4 & 5 are a good example of John's dependence on Old Testament imagery and language. In conveying his own throne room experience, John follows closely the throne room vision from Ezekiel 1-3. In both, there are four living creatures (the cherubim), as well as rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightning. In both, the throne has the appearance of precious jewels and a rainbow. In both, there is a scroll and angels who carry them. It isn't that the visions are identical, but that John uses standard biblical imagery that his readers would understand.

Here's an example of a contemporary (90AD) allusion in today's Scripture. The rider of the first horse comes out carrying a bow. Later, a murderous horde from beyond the Euphrates river to the east, in alliance with the beast from the bottomless pit, rides in to conquer the inhabitants of the empire (9:13-19) in a slaughter of millions. All this plays on the common first-century fear of the Parthians to the east, whose mounted archers were never defeated by the Romans. A popular legend of the day was that the hated Nero would return from the dead, lead the Parthians, and conquer the Roman empire.

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).<sup>1</sup> 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.

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."<sup>2</sup>

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.

#### **"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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

<sup>1</sup>For more, see David Kelsey's article, "Imagining Redemption," in the June 28, 2005 edition of *Christian Century*.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup>from 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.

### *Enter the beasts*

In Revelation 12, we saw Michael and his angel army defeat the dragon, Satan, and cast him to the earth, where he would be confined but still free to work his evil ways on our small planet. When the scene came to a close, the dragon was standing on the shore gazing malevolently out at the sea, which was, for the Jews, a symbol of chaos. It was the place from which the monsters came.

Then, in horror, John sees a great beast rising from the sea. It has ten horns and seven heads. A crown hangs on each horn. John's description of this beast draws on the monsters in Daniel 7, in which there are four beasts symbolizing four empires which rise one after the other to threaten and persecute God's people until, at last, they are defeated by God.

Here, in John's vision, the four empires/beasts are rolled into a single horror that emerges from the waves and the meaning is clear. This beast is the Roman empire. Worse, as John describes the scene it is clear that the beast is a sickening parody of the Lamb. For example, the beast from the sea has a fatal wound on its head, the Greek word for which is exactly the same word as used to describe the "slaughtered" Lamb. Just as the Lamb shares the throne, power, and authority of God (5:6,12,13; 12:5,10), so the beast shares the throne, power, and authority of Satan the dragon (13:2).

The crowds follow the beast and worship its master, the dragon, swooning at the power they seem to wield and their aura of invincibility. Yet, we know the dragon has already been defeated and John's visions will show us the rot that lies at the heart of the Roman empire. It may look good from a distance, but up close – all hideous distortion and corruption. Sadly, we are told that all the inhabitants of the earth whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life will worship the beast. There is no twilight here; only the light of the Lamb and the darkness of the beast. Choose! Choose!

Let's be clear here: The dragon represents Satan. The beast from the sea is Rome. John wants us to see that though the Christians may struggle against the empire, the larger struggle, the spiritual warfare, is against Satan the dragon – who has already lost but is not quite yet finished off.

### *The demonic trinity*

The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. The dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the land.

Yes, a second beast comes into view, one that has arisen from the earth. This beast brings people to the first beast. It performs mighty signs. And it makes the people build a giant image of the first beast, a bit like a large puppet, to which the second beast "gives breath." The people are deceived by this image and are wooed to the adoration of the first beast. How strong! How rich! How invincible! They cannot see the truth. This second beast is a false prophet

### *The mark of the beast*

Finally, all the inhabitants of the earth are marked as belonging to the beast, in contrast with the great multitude of Revelation 7, who bear the seal of the LORD God.

The mark they bear is "666." This is the mark of the beast. Without it, the people could neither buy nor sell anything.

Over the years, much has been made of this mark. We are told by John that it is the number of the beast. And he tells us that those who have insight can calculate this number. That seems odd, but it follows from the ancient systems for counting.

Basically, ancient cultures used letters from their alphabet as numbers, much like the Roman numerals we all learned in elementary school ("v" = 5). For example, in Pompeii there is graffiti that reads "I love her whose number is 545." When you work through the "666" it becomes clear to most scholars that the person John has in view is

Nero.<sup>3</sup> This makes sense, as Nero was so hated and feared that he came to symbolize persecution and terror.

Thus, the imagery becomes pretty clear. The question to the reader of Revelation is this: Will you bear the mark of the beast/Nero/Rome/Satan or will you bear the seal of God? Will you embrace the world that has chosen against God or will you embrace the LORD God and his ways? Will you remain in the darkness/dragon or will you choose the light/Lamb?

The point about the mark being required to buy and sell is that choosing the Lamb may well require us to make what seem like tough choices. In John's day, engaging in trade pretty much meant buying into the Roman system. How far will we go in making our way in this world? Will we know when we have embraced oppression and injustice in order to get by or to achieve "success"? John wants us to grasp that these choices are real and ever-present, even if much of the time we are blinded to them.

So . . . if we step back from John's vision for a moment, the question posed to us becomes evident: Will we bear the mark of the beast or will we bear the seal of our LORD God? The truth is that there is no other choice. There is darkness and there is light. There is the beast and there is the Lamb. Choose.

Finally, if we embrace God, desiring to bear his seal on our foreheads, we must stand ready to proclaim God's mighty acts to the world. A seal is meant to be seen. Let those who have ears, hear!

## Questions for 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 you 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 that we can do more for others. Is this your own experience? If so, how do find we such joy?
4. The first beast in John's vision is the agent of Satan, the one who opposes God and all his purposes (see rev. 12). What or who in our world work against the purposes of the LORD God? Try to get past easy targets. How are we complicit in the world's rebellion against God? How can we go about being God's agents, every day and in every way?

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<sup>3</sup> Nero is by far the most likely candidate supported by the majority of historical scholars, since the letters "Neron Caesar" in the Hebrew spelling add up to precisely 666: Nun (50) + Resh (200) + Waw (6) and Nun (50) + Qof (100) + Samech (60) + Resh (200) = 666.

5. How does the word “witnessing” strike you? Have you tended to think of it as mostly what you say? Do you agree that witnessing to Christ encompasses all that we say or do? How would you feel if the statement, “I am a Christian,” were stenciled on your forehead? How might it change your activities or your interactions with others? Do you see the problem that arises if you think that the stencil would necessitate big changes in your life? How could we come to live as if the stencil were always there?

## **Scott Engle’s Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Isaiah*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *1 Corinthians*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

### **Scott’s Sunday Class**

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

We are on a journey through the biblical story, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel.** Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.