

WORTHY IS THE LAMB

Revelation 5:8-14

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And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9).

There are some occasions that are so momentous that they warrant a new song. As an example, the Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was approached in 1880 to write music for a number of events occurring in Moscow. These included the dedication of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the 25th anniversary of Tsar Alexander II's coronation, and a commemoration of the Russian victory over Napoleon at Borodino. Tchaikovsky wrote the *1812 Overture*, famed for the resounding cannons that conclude its score. New compositions mark other special occasions, such as weddings, funerals, inaugurations and dedications.

There has never been a more momentous event, however, than the one recorded in Revelation 5, which John said warranted a new song in heaven. This event was the ascension and enthronement of the Son of God after successfully completing his saving work. John watched as Christ approached God's throne and took the scroll of the divine will. He wrote: "And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb... And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation'" (Rev. 5:8-9).

The new song that John heard in heaven is the song of redemption, celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the vision of chapter 4, John heard the song of creation sung to God's praise: "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things" (Rev. 4:11). This song is probably similar to the creation song God spoke of in Job 38:7, when "the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (NIV). But with Christ's redeeming work, there is a new cause for God's praise. William Hendriksen writes: "They sing a new song... because never before had such a great and glorious deliverance been accomplished and never before had the Lamb received this great honor."¹ Revelation 5 adds to chapter 4, therefore, in the same way that Christ's redemption adds to the glory of God in creation. The new song is offered to Jesus "because, having redeemed his people, he has taken the scroll which will determine the flow of future history, and that means that Jesus is controlling history in the interests of those he has redeemed."²

WORTHY TO BE WORSHIPED

The host of heaven sang a new song not only for the greatness of the occasion but also for a glorious cause: the worthiness of the Savior who has ascended and taken up his reign. "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals," they sing (Rev. 5:9).

Christ's worthiness is extolled not in the sense of his glorious divine person, but in light of his successful saving mission on earth. Hebrews 5:9 similarly says that Christ was "made perfect" by his obedient suffering as "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." Christ was always perfect in his being, but now he has qualified himself to be the Savior of his people. It is in this sense that he has become worthy to take the scroll and to be praised.

Verses 9 and 10 present the third of five songs in the vision that began in chapter 4. It contains the praise given to Christ by the twenty-four elders, who represent the redeemed church. They sing the new song: "Worthy are you to take scroll and top open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every

¹ William Hendriksen, 91.

² James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 16:4.

tribe and language and people and nation.” Christ is glorified for his sacrifice in death to redeem his people from their sins.

First, Christ is praised for being slain. He did not die from an unavoidable tragedy, but died as a voluntary act of sacrificial love for his people. Ancient history lauded the philosopher Socrates, when he willingly submitted to unjust execution out of the principle of loyalty. American children extol the name of Nathan Hale, the Revolutionary War patriot who regretted only that he had but one life to give to his country. Socrates died for a principle and Nathan Hale died for a cause. But the Christian has an even higher reason to love and adore God’s Son, Jesus Christ, since we can say, “He died for me.” He said, “I lay down my life for the sheep... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (Jn. 10:15, 18). Therefore, when people ask who killed Jesus Christ, the best answer is that Jesus willed his own death, for the sake of the people he loves.

Second, Christ is worthy because of what he achieved by his death: “by your blood you ransomed people for God” (Rev. 5:9). Different English translations render “ransomed” as “purchased” (NIV) or “redeemed” (NKJV). The Greek word (*agorazo*) has the general meaning of purchasing, but often had the specific connotation of ransoming a prisoner or slave out of bondage. Here we see the essence of what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross: at the cost of his own blood, which evidenced his death, Jesus delivered his people from the bondage and condemnation of sin. Many writers, especially in the early church, envisioned Jesus paying a ransom to Satan. This is a mistaken idea, however, since the Devil never had the true right to possess God’s people. Rather, Jesus made payment to the justice of God which demanded death as the penalty for sin (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23). Jesus foretold: “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28). Paul therefore wrote, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph. 1:7).

It is significant that the adoration of the church in heaven centers on the redemptive sacrifice of Christ’s cross. Similarly, when true Christians explain the substance of their faith, they always focus on his sacrificial death to purchase us from the debt of sin. In 1915, Benjamin B. Warfield made this point to incoming students at Princeton Theological Seminary, asserting that to Christ’s people his

most precious title is “Redeemer.” The reason is, he said, that “it gives expression not merely to our sense that we have received salvation from [Jesus], but also to our appreciation of what it cost him to procure this salvation for us.”³ Warfield proved this claim not from the tomes of theology but from the volumes of the church’s hymnody, listing song after song extolling Christ as Redeemer: “O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise;” “All hail, Redeemer, hail, for thou hast died for me;” “I will sing of my Redeemer, and his wondrous love for me: on the cruel cross he suffered, from the curse to set me free.” Warfield listed twenty-eight such hymns, and twenty-five more that used the word “ransom” to celebrate Christ’s sacrifice. Warfield might have added the new song of the twenty-four elders to prove the centrality of redemption in believers’ worship of Christ. James Boice writes: “Isn’t that why the elders, who represent the people of God from both the Old and New Testament periods, praise Jesus as the one who ‘purchased’ them for God with his blood? Isn’t it because they are remembering that Jesus died to redeem them personally, and the greatness of the cost?”⁴

If the death of Christ to ransom us from sin is the center of heaven’s worship, it must also be at the center of the church’s witness on earth. Once when I was the new pastor of a church, I decided to preach a series of sermons about redemption. After several weeks, a member came up to me after the service to complain bitterly about my constant emphasis on sin and salvation through Christ’s blood. He protested, “If you keep preaching on sin and Christ’s blood you are going to ruin this church!” I pointed out to him that according to the Bible, the single most important reason why Christ came to earth was to die as a ransom for his peoples’ sins. “Preaching about Christ’s blood may ruin *your* church,” I said, “but it will not ruin *Christ’s* church.” If fact, if we bear witness to the excellence of Jesus in many ways, yet neglect to proclaim the redemption of his cross, we fail to testify to the gospel and our worship deviates from that in heaven.

We should notice not only the emphasis of the elders of Christ’s redemption but also the kind of redemption they praised. We see this at the end of verse 9: “by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” The question

³ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “‘Redeemer’ and ‘Redemption’” in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1950), 325 – Check Page.

⁴ Boice, *Revelation*, 16:7.

is asked *for whom* Christ paid a ransom with his blood. Universalists reply that Jesus died for everyone, so that all are forgiven even if they refuse to believe in him. This is so utterly contrary to the Bible that no serious Christian can accept it. Others assert that Jesus died for all people equally, offering his blood for their salvation, yet only those who receive this gift in faith benefit from the cross so as to be saved. This view is called “general redemption” and is associated with Arminian theology. But this also conflicts with Revelation 5:9, along with other Bible verses on Christ’s redemption. The elders sing that Jesus actually “ransomed” those for whom he died, so they no longer remain in bondage. This can only describe those who are saved. Moreover, they use a definite, not a general, term for the objects of Christ’s redeeming work. He did not die for “every tribe and language and people and nation,” but for “people... from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

In other words, Christ redeemed particular people from all over the world, i.e., the elect. This affirms the Reformed doctrine of “limited atonement,” or “particular redemption.” This doctrine states that Christ died not merely to make redemption possible for everyone, if only they will believe, but rather that Christ died particularly for his own people, given to him by the Father in eternity past (Jn. 17:2; Eph. 1:4), who are actually and effectually redeemed by the blood of Christ paid as their ransom. These same persons go on to believe because the Holy Spirit applies the benefit of their redemption through the gift of saving faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Revelation 5:9 teaches an effectual redemption and a ransom that successfully purchases people for God. This argues, therefore, not that Christians are redeemed because we have believed, but rather that we have believed in Christ because by his blood he ransomed us for God.

RESTORED TO OFFER WORSHIP

This emphasis on God’s sovereignty is continued in verse 10, where the elders go on praising Christ because “you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:10). This emphasizes what we have been saved *to* and what Christ has made us to be: a kingdom and priests to God.

The elders' song teaches a salvation theology of restoration. Adam was placed into the Garden to be king and priest in service to God, but lost this office through his fall into sin. Israel in the Exodus was established by God to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Israel's calling was to live out the rule of God in obedience to his Word and bear a priestly testimony of God to the nations. Instead, Israel turned from God's Word to follow the idols of the nations around them. But where Adam and Israel had failed, Jesus Christ triumphed. Jesus succeeded not only through his own ministry as King of kings and true high priest, but also in making his church "a kingdom and priests to our God" (Rev. 5:10).

How thrilling this message is when we remember that Christ's kingdom consists completely of once-condemned sinners. The church acclaims Christ's worthiness, not her own! But we celebrate that Christ cleanses and forgives prostitutes like the woman who anointed his feet in Luke 7, murderers like Moses and King David, and arrogant persecutors like Paul. Paul notes the presence of others who were sexually immoral, idolaters, homosexuals, thieves, greedy, and drunkards. "But you were washed," he exclaims, "you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Douglas Kelly responds: "Absolutely nothing we have done in our life that is wrong, unworthy, nasty, unclean or impure disqualifies us to apply to the blood of the Lamb. You are invited to sing the song that they sing."⁵

It is noteworthy that in verse 10, "kingdom" is singular and "priests" is plural. Christ made a kingdom consisting of priests. The church is under the monarchy of Christ, so that his truth is to be taught, his commands are to be obeyed, and his saving grace is to be offered. The ancient church was not to bow to the demands of Caesar or to accommodate that tastes of pagan culture. Likewise, the Christian church today is not to affirm the edicts of Congress or of a President when they are contrary to Christ's Word. Moreover, the church serves Christ's kingdom in a priestly way. We see this in the description of Revelation 5:8: "when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." They are worshipping him with the new song of

⁵ Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 110.

redemption, holding the kind of small harp described in the temple worship of the Old Testament (see Psalms 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; etc.) and offering their prayers before his throne.

What a picture this presents of the church's worship! As the twenty-four elders prostrated themselves before Christ, we too must worship with "reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:28). The playing of harps while singing the new song shows that true worship engages not merely the mind but also the emotions and the will. Some godly Christians have urged against the use of instrumentation in the music of the church, but it is hard to sustain that argument in light of the evidence from heaven. As the Jewish priests daily burned incense before God, so too are we to pray fervently. In chapter 6, we will see that God's judgments fall on the wicked in response to the petitions of his people (v. 10). Here, we should probably understand more generally the prayer lives of God's people. We are reminded that prayer is not only petition but is also worship: we honor God by thanking him and by praying for his intervention; as Jesus taught us, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10).

The elders praise Christ not only for making them a kingdom and priests to God, but also because "they shall reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:10). Scholars debate when this reign takes place.⁶ Premillennialists assert that the reference is future, during a literal thousand year period when the church reigns in power on the earth before a final rebellion and the ultimate defeat of Satan. They argue that it cannot seriously be said that Christians are reigning during this present evil age of the world. Amillennialists correctly point out, however, that the church is presently described as "a kingdom and priests" and therefore presently reigns in Christ's name. Simon Kistemaker comments: "The text reads that the Lamb *made* them priests, that is, they are priests already and are in the kingdom now... Through their prayers, they even now rule on the earth."⁷

It is important, then, for Christians to realize what it means to reign on earth in Christ's behalf. In response to an alarming moral decline, American Christians have sometimes sought to reign by gaining control of worldly authority structures. It is questionable as to whether this is even possible without a loss of spiritual integrity and

⁶ The antiquity of this argument is perhaps reflected by the conflicting manuscript evidence, which equally supports both a present and a future reading for "reigns" in verse 10. See the discussion in Beale, *Revelation*, 362-3.

⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), Page.

legitimacy. More importantly, Christians should realize that our spiritual authority is always more potent than any worldly coercive power. We think of Polycarp of Smyrna, who inspired the early church by submitting to the lions rather than betray his Savior. We think of Martin Luther, who launched the Protestant Reformation from a pulpit, not from a princely throne. We think of Chinese house-church pastors like Allen Yuan and Samuel Lamb, who were imprisoned in labor camps for over twenty years, but immediately resumed preaching about Jesus when they were released. “The more persecution, the more the church grows,” Lamb stated. Yuan said only a few years ago, “We have a saying in Beijing. If you dare to preach, people will believe.”⁸

These evangelists remind us that just as Christ said, “my kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36), so also do Christians reign by the spiritual authority of biblical obedience and gospel proclamation. Derek Tidball comments: “The role of the church, then, is to be a faithful witness and to take an uncompromising stand for God, even to the extent of its members’ laying down their lives.”⁹ He cites the example of the Romanian pastor Joseph Tson, who was threatened with death by his Communist interrogator. Tson answered:

Sir, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Sir, you know my sermons are all over the country on tapes now. If you kill me, I will be sprinkling them with my blood. Whoever listens to them after that will say, ‘I’d better listen. This man sealed it with his blood.’ They will speak ten times louder than before. So, go on and kill me. I win the supreme victory then.¹⁰

Before that spiritual power, Tson’s jailors quailed and largely through the witness and prayers of Christians the Communist regime fell.

CREATION WELLING UP IN WORSHIP

Revelation 5 concludes with the entirety of creation responding to the adoration of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders by welling up in worship to God and the Lamb. First, we are shown the innumerable host of the angels, who offer their song to Christ: “Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living

⁸ Cited from David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Washington, D.C: Regnery, 2003), 57-65.

⁹ Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross, The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 313.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” (Rev. 5:11).

In describing the angels as “myriads and myriads and thousands of thousands,” the point is to show the innumerability in the very millions of God’s heavenly servants. It is probably significant that they give their praise to Christ following after the twenty-four elders, for it is through the redeemed church that the holy angels learn the glory of Christ’s saving work. Peter described the gospel doctrines as “things into which angels long to look” (1 Pet. 1:12). Now that they have comprehended the glory of Christ’s saving work through the worship of the church, the angelic hosts offer their own praise: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (Rev. 5:12).

This sevenfold list of praise to Christ seems to ascribe to him all the glorious possessions properly belonging to God himself. The fact that the Greek text provides a definite article only for the first item, “the power,” suggests that the whole list consists of a unified whole. Like the glorified church, the angels’ worship responds to Christ’s atoning death on the cross. Their testimony therefore shows that what once seemed like defeat for Jesus has been revealed as total victory. The cross was seen as weakness but was actually power; the cross displayed poverty, but gained true riches; the cross was foolishness to the world but wisdom from God; the cross epitomized weakness but exerted strength for salvation; the cross represented shame but earned the highest honor for Christ; the cross was a place of deep disgrace, yet revealed the very glory of God’s grace; and the cross stood for the curse of sin but achieved eternal blessing for those on whose behalf Jesus died. “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,” the angels conclude, inviting us to enter their praise.

Finally, the worship extends to the entire creation joined together in praise of God and the Lamb: “And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’” (Rev. 5:13). Here we see the farthest extent of Christ’s redemptive domain. As the angels comprehend the Lamb’s glory in the worship of the church, so also Christ’s redemption of his people undoes the curse of sin upon the entire created realm. The Creator and the Redeemer together are

praised by the work of their hands, the twin works of the Godhead having achieved their designed end in universal doxology.

THE SOVEREIGN IS GOOD

As we return to the world of the apostle John in writing the book of Revelation, we can see what this worship scene would have meant to the weak and threatened churches of Asia. It is Christ who reigns, not Caesar, and Christ's finished work of redemption has secured a destiny in which all things will work for the salvation of his people and the praise of God's grace. The chapter concludes with the only proper response: "And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped" (Rev. 5:14). That was how the beleaguered Christians were to respond: by adding their own "Amen" of faith in Christ's sovereign rule and by giving themselves over to joyful adoration, fulfilling their calling as a kingdom of priests.

The situation is little different for Christians today. In the year 2000, James Montgomery Boice, the famous Bible expositor and pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, was preaching through this very section of Revelation when he realized that something was wrong with his body. A doctor's examination revealed that Boice was afflicted with a cancer that must take his life within a few short weeks. I vividly remember Dr. Boice calling me to his office and calmly telling me this news. Shortly thereafter he addressed the congregation he had served for 32 years on the subject. The disease had progressed so rapidly that Boice could no longer preach, but could only speak briefly. After describing his condition and thanking them for their prayers, he noted that he had been preaching the sovereignty of God for so long and now they wanted to know if God was sovereign over his disease. Boice responded that his illness and impending death was not accidental but was God's sovereign will for his life. Yet even that was not the point he really wanted to make. He went on: "It's possible, isn't it, to conceive of God as sovereign and yet indifferent? God's in charge, but he doesn't care. But it's not that. God is not only the one who is in charge; God is also good. Everything he does is good."¹¹

¹¹ James M. Boice, "Testimony," access on-line at <http://www.tenth.org/articles/000507jmb.pdf>.

That is the very point made in Revelation 5. It is good news that God is on the throne instead of Caesar. Yet not only is God sovereign over history, but when we see Jesus taking the scroll we are assured that the Sovereign loves us so much as to die for our sins. We can trust him for whatever he brings into history and into our own lives.

I mentioned James Boice's farewell address to Tenth Presbyterian Church. I was seated directly behind him at the time and when he finished speaking we rose to sing the opening hymn of the worship service. Boice was not able to remain, so he set down his hymnal for the last time and walked to the door at the back of the chancel. As he approached the door he passed in front of me as I was struggling with my emotions. Boice stopped, looked me in the eyes, smiled, and said, "Press on, brother. Fight the good fight."

That, too, is the message of Revelation 5. Christ is enthroned, having redeemed us by his blood. We are now a kingdom of priests to serve him on earth. Knowing that the Savior who loved us reigns over all, let us get on with the work he has given us and devote ourselves to the cause of his glory. Let us not be daunted by the winds of earthly change or the vain threats of evil powers against the gospel. Christ is sovereign, reigning over all things for our good. Let us press on in faith with the priestly work of worship, witness, and prayer for the sake of his kingdom of salvation here on earth.