

Who Is Worthy?

Revelation 4-5

Our journey in Revelation began in September, in chapter one with John introducing the premise of the book as a personal and prophetic revelation of Jesus, written in hopes that by *seeing Jesus like never before*, we might *cling to Jesus like never before*. Then in chapters 2-3, we read 7 letters written by Jesus to 7 churches in Asia Minor, revealing how to be *victorious* in our faith. And today, we come to chapters 4-5, where John finally introduces the main body of book, the central 11 chapters that contain Revelation's central message. And as you've already heard, we're finally getting to the really wild and weird imagery of this book. Whether in a dream state or by actual inter-dimensional travel, John is transported into heaven, where he sees *someone* sitting on a throne, *someone* with a jewel-like appearance, accompanied by stormy weather, a rainbow, four *living creatures*, and twenty-four elders in white robes. And while it may be easy to assume we know what we're looking at, the complex imagery and bizarre characters John describes beg us to go in for a closer look; to ask, *what on earth (or in heaven) is going on here?*

First, John sees *someone* on a *throne* and, if you're assuming this *someone* is God, it's a reasonable instinct. In fact, the last image in the previous chapter was Jesus sitting on heaven's throne. And yet, for a book written to *reveal* Jesus, where John has already provided a detailed description of the exalted and glorified Jesus in chapter 1, describing God or Jesus here simply as *someone* is conspicuously vague. The surrounding details, however, offer clues, particularly in how they bear a striking resemblance to a vision recorded by the prophet Isaiah, who wrote:

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty.'" (Is 6:1-3)

Not only is John's vision an echo of Isaiah, both visions hyperlink to *another* vision seen by the prophet, *Ezekiel*. (Now, in the Jewish tradition, certain passages were deemed unsuitable for all audiences, due to their mature subject. *Song of Solomon*, for example, a graphic love poem, was considered inappropriate for those under the age of 13. But *Ezekiel 1* was thought so disturbing, it was prohibited to anyone under 30. So, *Listener discretion is advised*.

***"I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, but each of them had four faces... the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle... over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him."* (*Ezekiel 1, selected portions*)**

While Ezekiel's creatures each had *four* faces, John's all have different faces, but they're the same faces. Even if slightly distorted, it's clear that John's *six-winged, four-faced creatures* are a mash-up of Isaiah and Ezekiel's visions of God in heaven. And then, John adds a few details of his own. Thunder peels and lightning flashes, reminiscent of God's presence and power seen by Moses on Mt. Sinai. The glowing metal, burning fire, and shimmering jewels are John's best effort to describe this *someone* as a dazzlingly bright and brilliant, display of the full-colour-spectrum of pure light. The gemstones are from *Genesis 2*'s depiction of an uncorrupted Eden, and the encircling rainbow from the Noah story is an eternal sign of God's salvation. The four living beings are best understood as a composite-image of all the living beings created on page one of the Bible: the wild and domesticated beasts, the birds of the air, and the image-bearing humans. They are a symbolic depiction of a creation properly ordered and oriented around the *someone* sitting on the throne, and they offer unending song of praise, on repeat for all eternity.

And yet, there are things in this scene that are more difficult to explain, like *the twenty-four elders*, who don't come from anywhere in Scripture. Some have seen a link to the twenty-four musicians who served as priests in 1 Chronicles (though they're *priests*, not *elders*), while others suggest they represent the twelve apostles and twelve tribes of Israel, representatives of God's *old* and *new* covenant people. Still others see this as a depiction of *The Divine Council*, an assembly of spiritual beings seen in books like *Job* and *Daniel*. Despite all attempts to explain them, these gold-crowned, white-robed elders don't seem to come from the *Jewish* or *biblical* world. In fact, it seems more likely is that John is drawing these images from the *Roman* world.

Roman emperors were seen as gods, worshipped in temples and thought to live forever. And, while some emperors did try to give power back to the people, when Domitian became emperor in the year 81, *about a decade before John wrote Revelation*, he made people address him as *Dominus et Deus (Lord and God)*, having a choir sing his praise wherever he went, as well as twenty-four court-appointed attendants. He also created *The Capitoline Games* in his own honour and, at the opening ceremonies, required attendants to wear white robes and join the choir, singing: "*Hail, victory, lord of earth, invincible, power, glory, honour, peace, security, holy, blessed, great, unequalled, though alone, worthy art thou, worthy is he to inherit the kingdom.*" Tacitus, a respected Roman historian from this time, wrote that it was common for lesser kings to remove their crowns and place them on a statue of the emperor as a sign of subordination. When Vespasian became Emperor, he too was given golden crowns, inscribed with the words, "*Our savior and benefactor, the only worthy emperor of Rome.*" Ring a bell? John's vision ends: **"...the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.'" (Revelation 4:10)**

While these acts and words of worship are undoubtedly fitting for God, they would've certainly resounded like an unsettling echo of emperor worship in the ears of John's readers.

Another odd detail here is the presence of the *sea* in [verse 6](#). While it may not seem any more out of place than anything else in John's vision, in the ancient world, the *sea* was seen as an inhospitable and foreboding place. In the Biblical imagination, it symbolizes darkness, fear, evil, and death. It was out of the deep chaos-waters that God first brought order to the cosmos in [Genesis 1](#). Those same sea-waters destroy creation in the Noah-story, and it's the deadly sea that God miraculously parted and led Israel safely through in the Exodus, an act of salvation we reenacted last week in baptism. In the Bible, the *sea* is the realm of evil and death, which is why Jesus *calmed* the sea and *walked upon* the sea, not as cool magic tricks, but to show his power over the domain of darkness and death. Later in Revelation, the sea is home to the great dragon and the place from which monstrous beasts emerge. The martyred believers will again have to pass through the sea to complete their salvation journey. And in Revelation's final pages, earth and heaven unite and John reveals that, in eternity, ***"there is no longer any sea"*** ([Rev 21:1](#)). Evil, fear, darkness, and death are annihilated. This may seem like just Bible-nerd stuff but John is a Bible-nerd and his mention of the *sea* here isn't incidental; it's meant to make us question what we're seeing here, especially given how *calm* the sea is. In John's world, the dark and dread of death was epitomized by the Roman Empire, a vast sea of corruption, violence, and oppression, threatening to swallow John's readers into its abyss. Still, Rome prided itself as a place of *peace*. *Pax Romana*, they called it; *Roman Peace*. But it was peace for the powerful, for those who bow the knee to Caesar, peace at the end of a sword. Peace that appeared clear as crystal from a distance, a serene façade masking the swirling under-current of death just below the surface.

When you take it all in and see how John has imported *Roman* images, included Biblical symbols of *evil* and *darkness* and deliberately blurred the identity of the *someone* seated on the throne, you have to wonder *what's going on here?* Who is on the throne? Who has the created-order ordered itself around? And who is presiding over this sea of fear, chaos, and death, hailed with hymns of praise and crowns of gold? Is this *God*, or *Caesar*? Or worse, is the God John sees just a bigger, more powerful version of Caesar? Is God's rule in heaven just like all the glory-seeking, power-wielding, throne-sitting, gold-loving, ego-maniacal human rulers on earth, but *magnified*, turned up to *eleven*! As John shows us a god of thunder, lightning, thrones, crowns, riches, glory, honour and power, rule and dominion, the whole world seems to be declaring that *this* is what makes *someone* a *real* god; *this* is what makes a ruler truly *worthy* of our worship.

We're so enamored with power and powerful leaders, in boardrooms, politics, and even in the church. And, because our *imagination* of God is often limited to *imitation*, it's easy to see God as an over-sized, exaggerated version of this kind of power. For a persecuted, first-century church, tired of watching the Empire win and win and win, it was tempting to imagine God like this, someone to rescue them from Rome by fighting fire with an even bigger fire. And I wonder if, for us, deep down, this is who we want God to be too. Like kids on the playground, we want to know *our God can beat up your god*. But that's *not* the story Revelation reveals. And as John's vision continues, the destabilization you may be feeling right now turns into full blown distress.

"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. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?' But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it." (Revelation 5:1)

Whether or not we were supposed to be confused by the *earlier* scene, what John sees *next* is clearly distressing; the *someone* on the throne is holding a *scroll* that *no one*, not even

he, can open. The scroll was a powerful Jewish *and* Roman image. Biblically, scrolls represent the word and will of God, like in Ezekiel where God shows the prophet a scroll and tells him to eat it, symbolically digesting God's message to him. In Roman art, Caesar was often depicted holding a scroll in his right hand, *just as John has described here*, a reminder that he alone had the right to rule, to make decrees and, as the victor of every war, to write the history books. But the scroll was more than a historical record; it was a symbol of the authority of whoever held it to turn their will into reality, a divine script from which to direct world events. It's a bit like the sword, *Excalibur*. In the Arthurian legend, whoever was able to pull the sword from the stone was worthy to wield it; and here, only the one who is able to open the scroll is worthy to direct world events and determine the course of history, to make their will reality. And seeing *no one* worthy to open it, even in heaven, not even the *someone* on the throne, leaves John shattered.

"I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside." (Revelation 5:2-4)

No wonder he's so distraught. With all the churches are going through, John learns that, despite the precious-gemstone *glory*, the 24-elder crown-casting *honour*, and the thunder-and-lightning flashes of *power*, all the glory, honour, or power of heaven doesn't carry with it the ability to open the scroll. With *this* someone on the throne, it's as if *no one* is on the throne, as if the world is a runaway train barreling off the tracks, with no engineer, no map or destination. It's as if chaos is commanding the cosmos, darkness directing our destiny. This is John's worst nightmare come true, and so he weeps and wails, grieving the horrifying revelation.

Have you ever felt like John in this scene? You looked to God in your disappointment, pain, and confusion, only to get the sense that heaven has no answers, like God is powerless to help, like there's no one on the throne? Like John, you've shed tears, weeping and wondering,

where is God in my pain? Maybe you've even questioned whether God can be trusted, if God deserves to sit on the throne and, when it comes to our worship and allegiance, *is he worthy?*

If you've ever wept those tears, this passage was written for you. John continues:

"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.' (Revelation 5:5)

Seeing John's distress, one of the elders tries to assure him there is in fact *one* who *can* open the scroll, someone he refers to as the *Lion of Judah*. Judah was one of the twelve sons of *Israel* and father of the *tribe of Judah*, the lineage of Israel's greatest king, *David*. It was believed the Messiah would also come from this line and one of the earliest prophecies to this effect was a blessing spoken over Judah by his father, in which he's described as a *lion*. Back then, just as today, lions were an icon of majestic strength, royal authority, power and might. The term *Lion of Judah* was a way of referring to the Messiah as God's ultimate power. John *hears* that the lion can open the scroll but, when he turns to look, he *sees* something unexpected. He writes,

"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." (Revelation 5:6)

In Revelation, John often *hears* one thing and then turns to *see* something else entirely. It's a literary device he uses to contrast his *expectations* of reality with what he then *experiences* as the true reality, revealed in Jesus. We first saw this in chapter one, when John *hears* a loud trumpet blast, but then turns and *sees* Jesus speaking to him. Here in chapter 5, John *hears* of a *lion*, but turns to *see* that the *lion* is a *lamb*. It's about as opposite an image as you can imagine. Lions are fierce predators; lambs are easy prey. Lions are symbols of power, but lambs are what we call weak, feeble, and helpless people, the type who get led to the slaughter, just as Jesus was. Having already been wowed by the power display of the *someone* on the throne, John fully

expects the great power of the *lion* to tear open the scroll, only to be surprised to learn that the only one truly worth to open it is a small, slain, slaughtered, sacrificial lamb. John continues:

“The Lamb... went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. 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. 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. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’” (Rev 5:6-10)

Contrasting the spectacular vision of chapter 4 with the stunning revelation of chapter 5, John now sees the choir who’d been singing the same song on eternal-repeat launching into a *brand-new song*! They’d changed their tune, now praising the *Lamb*, not for its glory, honour, or power, but for its sacrifice, for having shed its blood to buy humanity back from sin and death, a pure act of self-sacrificing love that uniquely qualifies the Lamb to open the scroll. In the end, John discovers that *sacrifice*, not *strength*, the emptying of self for others, is the heart of what it means to be God, what it means to be truly *worthy*. That it’s not Caesar or his Empire that rules the world, but a new kingdom of countless common people from every tribe and tongue who will *reign* on earth because they *serve* as priests, laying their lives down with the Lamb, who alone is worthy to chart a new course for humanity, a movement of *true* peace and *perfect* love.

The good news John brings from the next world back to ours is that the *someone* on the throne is in fact the God who is revealed in *Jesus*. That the symbol of heaven’s true power isn’t the *might* of a *lion*, but in the *meekness* of a *lamb*. That the one who directs humanity’s fate is a God who wins over enemies, not with *force*, but *forgiveness*, with not just imitation-*glory*, but irrational *grace*, who topples empires, not *fighting fire with fire*, but by *calming the sea* of chaos and fear. This is the God who, as we celebrate this time of year, left heaven’s glory, honour, and

power behind to become a weak, helpless baby, setting aside the appearance of fiery brilliance to take on the appearance of flesh and blood, trading the throne-room of heaven for a stable in backwater Bethlehem, jewels for straw, his throne for a manger, to be surrounded not by four living beings, but filthy barnyard animals, worshipped not by elders in robes and crowns, but by a ragtag bunch of poor, day-labouring shepherds. This is who Jesus was, is, and will always be.

And it's a shock to our system.

If we want God to be a magnified version of earthly glory, honour, and power; if we think God is only worthy of our worship because he's bigger, stronger, smarter, higher, and greater than all other so-called powers-that-be, John is suggesting that we might be worshipping the wrong *someone*, or even the *right* someone for the wrong *reasons*. Revelation 4-5 invites us to worship the Lamb, slain and still stained bloody by sacrifice, to stand in awe (*or fall on our faces*) and join the properly ordered universe in laying down our crowns at the feet of the only one who is truly deserving of devotion and worthy of our worship, *not* because he can *destroy* his enemies, but because he *died* for them; *not* because of his capacity for total world domination, but because he loves us and gave his life for you, me, and everyone. *That's why Jesus is worthy.*

We all have one life to live, free to spend however we choose. Every day, whether on purpose or unconsciously, we assign value and worth to people and things, our actions revealing what we really think is worth our time, focus, and attention, our love and devotion, our physical and mental energy. And, if we're honest with ourselves, we spend a lot of our lives on relatively *unworthy* pursuits, devoted to our careers or businesses, fleeting pleasures, filling our calendars with sports and social commitments, collecting travel and vacation experiences, improving our physical appearance, promoting political agendas, *and the list goes on*. These aren't bad things;

in fact, they can be healthy parts of a life well-lived. But when they *become* our lives, we need to ask whether it's *worth* it. Whether money, power, pleasure, and status really *deserve* the attention we give them? Do you *hear* them roaring like a *lion*, claiming to be able to open the scroll and direct you to the good life? Or today, will we turn, like John, and *see* the Slain Lamb, who gave his life to purchase you and set you free for something better. Will we, like the choir in heaven, change our tune, sing a new song, declaring that Jesus alone is worthy of our worship?

As the band comes to lead us in some songs of response...

The question for us today is, is Jesus worthy our worship? Is he enough? Can we trust Jesus to sit on the throne of *our* hearts and direct our lives. Is he deserving of our crowns – *all we've valued and achieved* – worthy to reorder and reorient our lives around? You and I have one life to live, to spend however we choose. Every day, we hear the call of far-less-worthy options, all roaring for our attention. The question is, when we turn to see Jesus, *is he worthy?*