

Who Is Worthy to Open the Scroll?

Text: Revelation 5:1-14

By Pastor Trent Boedicker

“Is this person qualified? Does he have the necessary credentials? Is he worthy?” Those are questions you might ask when considering someone for a job, especially if it’s a situation where you’re putting your life into their hands. For instance, when you’re getting ready to board an airplane, and you see the pilot sitting at the controls as you step through the door, you may wonder about his qualifications. “I sure hope this guy knows what he’s doing,” you tell yourself.

He smiles and welcomes you aboard, so you decide to ask him a few questions hoping to alleviate your anxiety. “I noticed the silver wings on your uniform,” you say. “I’m just curious, how many hours of training did it take to earn those wings?” He responds, “Oh, this pin? You noticed that, huh? There’s a great story behind it and you wouldn’t believe what I went through to get them. I was at a garage sale a few weeks ago and spotted it on a table mixed into with some jewelry. They were asking ten bucks, but I offered two dollars and fifty cents, and they took it. What a deal, right!”

Okay, that wasn’t quite the answer you were looking for so you probe a little deeper. “That’s awesome,” you say, “but I’m sure you have tons of experience soaring through the clouds. How many years have you been a pilot?” He thinks about that for a minute, and starts counting with his fingers. “Okay, let’s see is it seven or eight? No, I’m pretty sure I’ve been on the job for nine days now. And they’re letting me fly solo today!”

At that moment you are really starting to wonder if he’s the right person to take you to your destination. Is he worthy? I don’t know; if it were me I think I’d gather my luggage and run. I just remembered I need to catch a later flight.

You wouldn’t place your life into the hands of just anyone. What about your future? ...your soul? ...your eternal destiny?

Our passage in Revelation chapter 5 raises the question: “Who is worthy?” That is, who is able to bring God’s plan of redemption to completion? Who can overthrow the forces of darkness and deliver God’s people? Who has the right to establish God’s kingdom and reign forever? Who is deserving of all glory and honor and praise? Scripture tells us that there is only one who is worthy of these things, and his name is Jesus.

The Apostle John wrote these words towards the end of his life, around 95 AD. He had served Christ faithfully for many years, and now he found himself exiled to the island of Patmos, off the coast of modern day Turkey, in the Aegean Sea. Like many believers of his day, John suffered persecution for his faith at the hands of the Roman Empire. For some, the situation may have seemed hopeless, but John realized that no matter how dark or desperate things may have seemed, God is still in control and one day the Lord will return to reclaim the world from the powers of evil and he will make all things new. It was there, during his exile, that he received a vision of things to come. The Lord offered him a glimpse of the future to give us assurance that

good will ultimately prevail over evil, and light will eventually vanquish the darkness, and Christ will decisively triumph over Satan once and for all. Knowing this helps us to hang on when life is difficult.

In John's vision, he found himself caught up to the throne room of heaven. Flashes of lighting erupted all around him, and the sound of thunder echoed through the air. I'm sure it was both exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. The things he witnessed must have been beyond human comprehension. God the Father was sitting on the throne, and heavenly creatures surrounded him, singing his praise. At that moment John noticed that the Father was holding something in his hand; it was a scroll covered with writing. The voice of angel rang out asking, "Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?" But no one responded. No one stepped forward to take the scroll: no angel, or man, or creature. There was only silence. John couldn't tell what was written on the scroll, but he understood that it needed to be opened in order for God's purposes to be accomplished, and so he began to weep.

Maybe you have felt like John. You have wept tears of sorrow in moments of your life when it felt as if all of heaven had grown silent. You've been waiting for someone to set things right, to mend what is broken, to offer hope in the midst of the darkness. Sometimes we don't see how the Lord is working. The passage encourages us to hold on, because there is one who is worthy, and in his time he will accomplish his good purpose.

As the chapter goes on, that scene of sorrow would become a chorus of praise, because Christ has come and is coming again, and he is worthy.

Look at verse 1. *"I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals. ² And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?'"*

The passage doesn't tell us exactly what is written. It wasn't quite what you might picture when we talk about a book, full of pages, bound with a cover. That type of codex wasn't developed until the next century. This was a scroll, rolled up, and sealed. One commentator explains,

[Ancient scrolls were] made of papyrus, manufactured in single sheets about ten inches by eight. The sheets were joined together horizontally when a great deal of writing had to be done. The writing was in narrow columns, with margins of about two and a half inches at the top and at the bottom, and with about three-quarters of an inch between the columns. The roll usually had a wooden roller at each end. It was held in the left hand, unrolled with the right, and, as the reading went on, the part in the left hand was rolled up again. The books of 2 and 3 John, Jude and Philemon would each occupy one sheet of papyrus; Romans would require a roll 11^{1/2} feet long; Revelation itself would occupy a roll 15 feet long.¹

Of course this was no ordinary scroll, and we can't determine anything about the dimensions or what it looked like, except that it had writing on both sides and was sealed with seven wax imprints. What was the significance of this book? A number of suggestions have been offered:

- Charles Ryrie calls it the *Book of Redemption* and says “it contains the story of man’s fall through sin and rise through Christ.”ⁱⁱⁱ Taking possession and opening the seals in effect brings God’s plan of salvation to its completion.
- Others have called it a *Book of Woe*, proclaiming judgment upon a rebellious and unbelieving world. It warns the inhabitants of the earth to turn back to God, before it is too late. As the seals are broken in the following chapters, God’s wrath is poured out.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Some have called it the *Title Deed for God’s Creation*.^{iv} In the book of Genesis, the first humans were given dominion over the earth, but their claim was forfeited because of sin. Today Satan is called the ruler of this world and the prince of the power of the air. But God will one day reclaim what is rightfully his.

I think there is truth in all of these suggestions. One author says,

“The scroll, then, is not only about judgment or about the inheritance of the kingdom. Rather, it contains the announcement of the consummation of all history—how things will ultimately end for all people: judgment for the world and the final reward of the saints. Christ alone, as the Messiah, is the executor of the purposes of God.”^v

If this is the case we can understand why John wept when no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll. All of history has been leading to this moment. Everything God has been doing to redeem sinful man and to restore this fallen world finds its fulfillment here. Without someone to break the seals and reveal the contents of the book, there would be no hope. But one of the elders encouraged the apostle and pointed to a figure who approached the throne.

Christ is worthy of praise, because he is the Lion of Judah.

Look at verse 5. Verse 5 tells us, “...one of the elders said to me, ‘Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.’”

The lion, of course, is a symbol for royalty. We call it the king of the jungle because it is powerful and mighty. It stands supreme over all the other animals of the earth, fierce and ferocious, with sharp teeth and jagged claws. Its roar causes everyone around to tremble.

Maybe you have caught a glimpse of that at the zoo. The lion habitat in the Columbus Zoo lets you get up close and personal. The only thing separating you from this magnificent creature is a glass window. I’m sure the glass is pretty thick. But you are close enough to look into its eyes. It’s enough to make the hairs of the back of your neck stand up. Just imagine meeting the king of the jungle in the wild. It would be an awesome and terrifying experience.

Jesus is called the lion of the tribe of Judah which tells us that he is a king... and not just any king, but the long-awaited Messiah, spoken of by the prophets. Honor and glory and power belong to him forever. His name is exalted above every name. His throne is lifted high above all

other thrones. One day, the forces of darkness will tremble before him when he comes again, and no enemy or foe will be able to stand before him.

Jesus comes from the root of David. That is to say, his earthly lineage can be traced all the way back to the royal family of one of Israel's greatest kings. During David's reign, in the OT, the Lord made a promise to him that one of his descendants would establish a kingdom of peace over all the earth that would never end. And he will over the house of Israel and all the earth forever. This mysterious figure came to be known the Messiah. Through difficult times, the people of Israel held on to this promise. For hundreds of years, they waited for this Messiah to come, hoping he would deliver them from their enemies. But when he came to earth, Jesus turned out to be a different sort of king than they were expecting. He did not ride into Jerusalem on a stallion with an army at his side, waving swords and shields. He rode in on the back of a donkey, humble and meek. He did not come to deliver them from the oppression of Rome, but he came to save us from our sin. That was stumbling block for many. Despite his miracles, Jesus did not fit their expectations of what the Messiah was supposed to look like, and they refused to believe he was the one they had been waiting for, but underneath his humble appearance, was the King of kings and Lord of lords.

It's not just his earthly lineage that makes him a king. More importantly, Jesus is the Son of God, and the Father has granted him authority to reign over all creation. Ephesians 1:20-21 (NIV) says the Father "*...raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.*"

That's pretty amazing when we think about what it means. There are incredibly powerful people in this world. If they want something done, it happens (snap), just like that. When they speak, the whole world is listening. Their words carry tremendous weight. Even the everyday events of their lives make the news. And there are powerful forces that exist, in the spiritual realm. Even though we may not see them with our eyes, we realize there are angels and demons at work, that influence the affairs of this world. But no matter how powerful those forces might be, Scripture tells us that Jesus is far above them all. And one day he will come in glory; every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Imagine how encouraging these words must have been to believers in John's day, who may have felt weak and powerless when they were persecuted for their faith. Some of them were arrested, and dragged before the authorities. These verses are a reminder that we don't need to be intimidated by anyone, because we belong to the one true king. History has witnessed the rise and fall of many great empires, but his kingdom will have no end. So be bold, and live for his glory.

One day he will exalt his people, and we will share in his reign. Revelation 5:10 (NASB95) "You have made them *to be* a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."

Christ is worthy of praise, because he is the Lamb who was slain.

Look at verse 6.

⁶ And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. ⁷ And He came and took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. ⁸ When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. (Revelation 5:6–9 NASB95)

As the scene continued to unfold, John could see Jesus standing in the center of the room before the throne, ready to take possession of the scroll. But his appearance was not what we might have expected. He was not dressed in majesty and splendor. But his appearance was like a lamb that was slain.

I don't know if this means he saw a literal lamb and understood it to represent Jesus. It's also possible this describes the marks of crucifixion on the body of Jesus. The nail prints were visible on his hands and feet, from the metal spikes that fastened him to the cross. And on his side was a scar from where the spear of the soldier pierced his flesh. It may seem surprising that the risen Jesus would still bear these marks, elsewhere in Scripture we are told the resurrection body will be perfect and glorious, but perhaps those scars will remain on his body through eternity for our benefit, as a reminder of the sacrifice he gave. If that's the case, those marks will not be a symbol of shame but an expression of love. Every time we glance at those wounds, we will see a powerful demonstration of his love for us.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). That picture tells us a great deal about his character and the work he accomplished.

Just as the wool of lamb is white and pure, Jesus lived a perfect life when he walked this earth. He did something no one else has ever done, keeping every command in God's Law, and obeying the will of his Father in all that he did. This was necessary if he was to become our Savior. 1 Peter 1:18-19 (NIV) says, "...it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish..."

And Jesus presented himself willingly as our sacrifice. When the soldiers led him away to the place of execution, he didn't have to comply. At any moment, he could have summoned angelic armies to rescue him. All the power of heaven was at his disposal, but instead of thinking of himself he was thinking of us. He gave himself willingly into the hands of wicked men and allowed them to nail his body to the cross. Isaiah 53:7 (NLT) tells us, "*He was oppressed and*

treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth.”

And Jesus poured out his blood for us. In the OT, the children of Israel were told to paint the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts, so when the angel of death passed over their homes that night they would be spared. In this way the blood of Christ saves us from the judgment of God, cleansing our hearts from sin.

We talked about the mighty lion, but if you’ve ever been to a petting zoo, you probably know that lambs are not known as ferocious creatures. Actually, it’s basically the opposite picture. They are mild, and gentle, and approachable, and meek. Even children feel safe approaching them.

But that doesn’t mean Jesus is passive or weak. He is a triumphant lamb. After having tasted death, he rose from grave to bring us life everlasting. Through his sacrifice he conquered the forces of darkness, and won the victory over sin.

The picture of the lamb, in our passage, may sound strange. John describes the lamb in verse 6 as “...having seven horns and seven eyes...” That’s doesn’t sound like any lamb I’ve ever seen. But you have to remember the book of Revelation is filled with symbols. Seven is the number that signifies perfection. And throughout the Bible horns are a symbol for power or authority, so this is telling us that Christ is the almighty and all powerful one. And yet he allowed himself to be slain for sinners. The eyes describe the scope of his vision. The number seven tells us nothing that happens on this earth that escapes his notice, he is all knowing, an attribute that only God possesses.

Jesus is the Lamb who was slain. With his blood he has redeemed a people from every nation, tongue and tribe. In the present, the gospel is going forth to all the world, offering redemption to everyone who will embrace him as their Savior, but one day all of his people will stand together in his presence together to glorify his name.

Conclusion –

Verse 5 tells us that Jesus has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals. He has triumphed! He has conquered! He has prevailed, through the cross and the empty tomb! Yes, the devil and his minions continue to roam the earth for a little longer, but his days are numbered. Christ is coming, and he will reclaim what is rightfully his, overthrowing the forces of darkness, and delivering his people to glory. There is no doubt that purposes of God will be fulfilled in his time. That means we can live with confidence today, knowing that through all the battles we face in this life, the final victory has already been won.

What battles are you facing today? Maybe you’ve been weighed down by feelings of hopeless and despair. Maybe you been struggling with sin. Maybe you’ve been afraid to share your faith with those around you. Whatever it might be, we can walk in the victory of his death and resurrection.

One commentator says,

Here is a tremendous picture of Christ. He is the fulfilment of all the hopes and dreams of [God's people], for he is the Lion of Judah the Root of David. He is the one whose sacrifice was for the benefit of all, and who still bears the marks of it in the heavenly places. But tragedy has turned to triumph and the shame to glory; and [his] all-conquering might no one can withstand.^{vi}

The passage encourages those who have become weary through the relentless struggles of life, telling us to hang on because the day is coming when Christ will be revealed. We live in a fallen world and experience so much brokenness and heartache. But even in the darkest moments, the light of Jesus continues to shine pointing to the day when he set things right again.

How do we respond the one who is worthy? The same way the heavenly host responded in the passage, with worship and praise. We join the angelic choir and give him honor and glory. Revelation 5:11–13 (NASB95)

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." ¹³ And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever."

ⁱ Barclay, W. (2004). *The Revelation of John* (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, Vol. 1, pp. 190–191). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

ⁱⁱ Ryrie Study Bible, p.1954

ⁱⁱⁱ Luter, A. B. (2017). [Revelation](#). In E. A. Blum & T. Wax (Eds.), *CSB Study Bible: Notes* (pp. 2024–2025). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

^{iv} Johnson, A. F. (1981). [Revelation](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation* (Vol. 12, p. 468). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

^v Luter

^{vi} Barclay