

Revelation 5:1-4 reads, **“Then I [John] 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. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.” Revelation 5:1-4**

There is so much about heaven that is unclear and mysterious and unknown to us, but one of the things we know for certain because we are later told is there will be no crying in heaven for God will wipe away every tear. So, why was John, surrounded by beauty and God’s presence, in a place where we’re told there will be no more tears, weeping?

In the chapter just before we get this incredible picture of the activity and beauty of heaven. John, who is exiled on an island, had a vision one Sunday while praying, and He sees Jesus. Jesus tells him to write what he sees and to write specifically to 7 churches. After he’s written down what Jesus has spoken to him he sees into heaven. It’s as if a curtain is drawn back and he sees fully what he’s only ever known in part, prophesied about in part, heard about in part – as we talked about last week. And, what he sees far outweighs anything he had previously experienced or imagined. So much so that he struggles to find words that will fully describe what he sees.

John looks and the first thing he sees is a throne with someone sitting on it. All through scripture there had been various prophets who saw a similar scene in visions of their own. The prophet Micaiah had told King Jehoshaphat he saw the Lord sitting on His throne. Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted. Daniel saw a throne with the Ancient of Days seated on it. And, Ezekiel saw a throne that looked like sapphire with

bright light and the appearance of rainbows. There's no doubt that John is seeing God and He is surrounded by light and a rainbow. If you remember the story of Noah's ark God gave a sign of the rainbow as a promise to not destroy the earth again. It became a symbol of God's mercy. So now John is describing mercy to us – not what mercy is or what it does but what it looks like. How would you describe what mercy looks like? What's the color of mercy? The pragmatist needs Jesus in the picture to point to as the great example of mercy, but the poet needs the rainbow of colors to even begin to scratch the surface of all the richness, and goodness, and beauty, and radiance that makes up mercy.

John then sees 24 other thrones with 24 elders representing the old covenant of 12 tribes of Israel and the new covenant with 12 disciples. It's his best description to tell us all of God's people are present and accounted for and surrounding the throne. John further engages our senses to tell us what he hears and smells and sees – flashing of lightening, rumblings of thunder, smoke from seven lamps symbolizing the church, and a sea that's so still and clear it could be glass or crystal. The Holy Spirit is fully present, and God's presence is overwhelming. Then John sees living creatures – it's like a representative of every type of animal and bird and thing God made including mankind.

And, there were angels. They would cry out in worship to God, **“Day and night they never stop saying, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.” Revelation 4:8** It's the one word used to describe God that gets used in triplicate. We don't say God is love, love, love though that would be true. Jackie Hill Perry says, **“With all three ‘holys,’ the seraphim are emphasizing the absolute, unalterable, essential, and total holiness of God. To say that God is holy, holy, holy is to say that God is most holy. He is totally holy. Completely holy. Unwaveringly holy. Utterly holy...His**

**holiness is intrinsic to His nature as God. It's as essential to Him as creaturely dependence is to us." Jackie Hill Perry**

The angels and the creatures love to declare that the God who created them, the God they serve, the God in whose presence they never leave, that God is almighty, and He is holy, holy, holy. And, John notices that when they declare who God is, declare His nature, sing of His holiness, when they give glory and honor and thanks to God then the people of God – the 24 elders will take the gold crowns they are wearing and lay them before God as they bow down before Him in worship saying, **“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” Revelation 4:11**

John sees incredible beauty – God the Almighty, the Eternal One, resplendent with the appearance of jewels, seated on a throne, encircled by mercy, surrounded by all of His people, all that He has made and spoke into being is present, the church is represented, the Holy Spirit is before the throne, the angels are singing, all of creation is declaring His praise – worship is pouring forth and then John turns and looks to the right side of the throne and realizes something is wrong and he begins to weep. But, how can John, surrounded by all of this, be weeping in a place where there should be no tears?

They're singing around the throne – You, oh God, are worthy, you created all things – it's only in you they even came to be and have life and breath. But, John knows himself, he knows his own sin nature as a result of a broken world because of sin that entered in the Garden of Eden. So when he hears the voice of the angel asking the question – who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll? He knows it's all come to this. How could anyone be found to open the scroll? For all have sinned so all is lost. The creator God, way

back in the beginning had committed Himself to working within His creation. Mankind was the crowning achievement of creation through which God would work, but with sin came a problem for how that could be accomplished. God gave us free will to choose obedience or disobedience. Eve and Adam each chose to disobey, and sin and death entered the world. Punishment was given to them, and things were set in motion for future redemption but it would be a long time coming and indeed we're still waiting. The story of Scripture goes on to tell us about the people of Israel being chosen by God to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But they rebelled and chose to serve other gods over the Almighty God. They end up in complete depravity with everyone doing what seemed good in their own eyes. God sent a prophet and a leader to them, they clamored for a king, God relented saying they've not rejected the prophet but me. The kings were a mixed bag of good and bad – mostly bad – leading the people further and further into sin and away from the commands of God. Once again punishment was given – the people of Israel were sent into exile – God allowed His beloved, chosen people to be taken captive by enemy nations. Isaiah the prophet sees a vision of what will happen to Jerusalem and says the words of the vision will be sealed in a scroll with no one to read them. The prophet Ezekiel, living in exile, is then shown a scroll that had writing on both sides. **“On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.” Ezekiel 2:10** The words of that scroll pronounced a warning and judgment. Daniel, also in exile, is given a vision into heaven and one regarding what is to come and is told to **“close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end.” Daniel 12:4** Daniel asks what will the outcome be of all this and is told only that the words are closed up and sealed until the end. Eventually, some of God's people return to the land they were promised. But, now 500 years or so have passed since Daniel saw

those words sealed up and Israel is still an occupied land, sin is still rampant, John is in prison on an island, all the other disciples have been killed. And, so John weeps. The weight of the failure of humanity is too much. The words are still sealed. There is still no one to read them. All that is still to take place – judgment and redemption, the way in which it will all unfold – it’s still sealed. How could they find God, the only one worthy, but in human form so as to keep His promise to work within creation, yet a man who had not sinned for that was the only way the scrolls could be opened. John in his dream like vision, can’t think, can’t reason, can’t make sense of it. It’s impossible. **“No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.” Revelation 5:3-4** So, John weeps, surrounded by beauty, standing in God’s presence, in a place where there should be no tears.

But what if there was a way. We revisit the story from the beginning – even in the Garden as punishment for sin was being given we hear words that speak of hope and that promise a future. The enemy will eventually be crushed by an offspring of the woman. This puts the plan of redemption into action. God chooses Abraham and Sarah to start a family that will be more numerous than all the sand on the seashore and from which all nations will be blessed. Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, has 12 sons that we know as the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel. As Jacob lay dying, he called his children in to bless them. One of his sons, Judah, steps forward and he says, **“You are a lion’s cub, Judah... The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.” Genesis 49:9-10**

Later when God has given His people a king to rule over them King David comes from this

tribe – the tribe of Judah. To David God promised, **“The Lord himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom...my love will never be taken away from him...Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”** **2 Samuel 6:11-16** Disobedience altered the plan, but because of this promise even as the kingdom was split God remained true to His word. When the people were exiled, a remnant remained and God kept and preserved the line of David, which is the line of Judah, who came from Abraham, from whom God promised all nations would eventually be blessed. The prophet Isaiah wrote that on a future day in the very place where the exile began a new light would dawn and a child would be born, and **“Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.”** **Isaiah 9:7** The prophet goes on to explain that not only would he be a son of David sitting on his Father’s throne, but that he would be a new kind of David. **“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”** **Isaiah 11:1** True to His word, a few hundred years later, God chose a young couple, Mary and Joseph, of the house and line of King David, to bring forth a son in Bethlehem. A child born of the tribe of Judah, and the line of David, but He was no ordinary child. He would be different – not another king to lead the people astray, but a new branch from the family tree – a new type of King who would bring in a new type of kingdom – but it would be ushered in through His sacrificial death on a cross and His resurrection.

So knowing all this we return to the throne room and ask again – why, in a place surrounded by beauty and God’s presence, in a place where there will be no tears, is John weeping? Why is he so certain no one could meet the criteria – worthy in the way that only God is worthy, yet a man made of flesh? Why is John crying? Doesn’t he know? Doesn’t he get it? Doesn’t he know who fits the description – who fulfills all the prophecies? Doesn’t he realize who can open the scroll?

And, then through his tears, he hears one of the 24 elders speak, “Do not weep! See...” Look again, John, through your tears, your doubts, your concerns. Look again, and see for yourself. **“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** Don’t cry, John, because God has been at work all along. He was never going to leave the scroll unopened. He was always going to make a way. Don’t cry, John, for the lion’s cub is now a roaring Lion, the Son of David has become the king of all kings, and the Messiah has triumphed. Look again, John, look through your tears – it’s Jesus.

So, John through his tears looks at where the elder is drawing his attention. But, when he looks it’s not actually a lion that he sees, but a lamb. **“Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne...He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.” Revelation 5:6-7** The victory of the Lion was secured through the death of the lamb. N. T Wright explains it like this: **“The lion is the symbol both of ultimate power and of supreme royalty, while the lamb symbolizes both gentle vulnerability and, through its sacrifice, the ultimate weakness of death. But the two are now to be fused together, completely and for ever. From this moment on, John, and we as his careful readers, are to understand**

**that the victory won by the lion is accomplished through the sacrifice of the lamb, and in no other way... Think of the lion, yes, but gaze at the lamb.” – N. T. Wright**

Jesus' death is what brought victory. His death changed everything. Maybe, John, surrounded as he was with such beauty and such an awareness of God's presence, is weeping not at the impossibility but because suddenly it all makes sense and he is overwhelmed at the goodness of the Father God to have given His Son, Jesus. John had stood at the foot of the cross watching as his beloved friend, whom he had walked with, lived with, learned from, given three years of his life to, was tortured, beaten, and crucified. He watched as they pierced his side, as they declared him dead. He stood and bore witness to His death, but he also ran to the tomb and witnessed Jesus – alive. Maybe John wept because he knew when the elder said, look, he knew exactly who he would see, and in that moment something clicked and made sense for the first time. Jesus' death has been the plan all along – for without it no one could be found worthy. John sees a lamb who because of His death has all power, all wisdom and insight. John sees the authority that has been given to Jesus through his death as the fulfillment of what the prophet Daniel had written hundreds of years before. In Daniel's vision of the throne room he had seen the Ancient of Days seated on a throne, attended by thousands upon thousands. **“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” Daniel 7:13-14** John is seeing that authority that Daniel saw being given to Jesus. So, maybe John weeps because



he cannot contain the emotion that fills his heart and his mind as he sees Jesus in a way he's never seen him before. And yet the response to having seen Jesus with all authority and all power. Having seen Him as the One who died for the sins of the world, as the one who rose victorious. The one who was now standing in the middle of the throne encircled by those same representatives of all creation and the same elders representing God's people, whom Jesus died to redeem. Seeing all this, knowing now that Jesus is worthy because He is the sacrificial lamb who died – the response is not more tears but it's worship.

When Jesus takes the scroll the representatives from creation and from the people of God fall on their faces in worship. They see Jesus with all power and authority and their response is worship! They begin to sing a new song, which in the Old Testament is what God's people did to signify victory. Singing and worship are fully connected here and are on full display as the activity of heaven.

### **Why do we worship?**

#### **1. To signify victory**

We sing because through Jesus' death on the cross He has won. And because we are 'in Christ' we share in that victory. We sing at church as a way of declaring – we, collectively, as God's people, have won. Jesus is victorious.

#### **2. To connect with heaven**

Paula Gooder wrote – **“These songs invite the readers of the book into an early experience of the unity that will be experienced at the end of times. By giving the words of the songs of the angels, the author of Revelation invites his readers to join in with the songs of heaven in their worship. This is no academic exercise but the rehearsal of hope.”** – Paula Gooder Through this rehearsal we catch a glimpse of what

heaven will feel like. Worship unites us not only with each other but with the ongoing and current activity of heaven. Singing is the way we bring heaven to earth and have earth meet heaven. Singing in worship is how the church of every generation unites to offer praise, to signify victory, and to encourage our hearts that one day soon we will all be together singing as one voice around that throne.

### **3. To shift our focus**

Remember that John is writing and seeing this vision of the worship in heaven while he is alone, in exile, on an island. We may feel isolated and alone, and as if the circumstances of our lives are going to crush us with their weight. We can't go on like this – the pain is too great, the need too big. Like John it feels impossible and we're weeping. In heaven there will be no more tears, but we're still here and we're hurting. In heaven we'll be surrounded by beauty but the view where you are is anything but beautiful. In heaven we'll know and feel God's presence but here we wonder sometimes – where is God right now. But, when we worship – in spite of our pain, in the midst of our trial, with tears streaming down our face we are more connected with God than at any other time. We are joining in with all the angels, all of creation, the elders who have gone before. When we worship we are less alone than at any other time. Worship shifts our focus to Jesus and allows us for those moments to know that we are not alone.

### **4. Because Jesus is worthy**

We look again – through our tears perhaps – and we see Jesus, the lamb who was slain, who paid the price for our sins. The only one worthy to take the scroll and open it. He is worthy because He has purchased us with His blood that was shed for us on the cross and has

chosen us to be His forever and ever. He is worthy – all of creation declares it. The angels proclaim it. Our response to the Lamb is to fall down in worship.

One last time we ask: Why, in a place where there are no tears, is John weeping? Because everywhere he looked no one could be found who could do the impossible until he looked and saw Jesus. With Jesus fully in John's gaze the weeping ends and the worship begins.

As the worship team returns we're going to take a moment to join together with all of heaven to signify victory, to connect with heaven, to shift our focus, and to declare Jesus is worthy.

Here's the words of the songs they're singing:

**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."**

**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. 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!"**

**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!"**

**The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.**

**Revelation 5:9-14**