

## Christmas from the Book of Revelation -The Triumph of the Lamb

Sign Title: The Triumph of the Lamb

December 5, 2010

Good morning! My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. This morning we are beginning a new series called *Christmas from the Book of Revelation*. We will begin by reading from our Bible so I ask that you take your copy of the Bible and turn to Revelation 5. Please stand in honor of the Word of God for our Scripture reading for this morning.

### Revelation 5

Please keep your Bible open in front of you as we move into our study this morning. I know the title of this series sounds a little weird. It is probably safe to assume *Christmas from the book of Revelation* is something to study at Christmas that you haven't done before. The reason I chose this book for the season is because Revelation is one of the most Christ saturated books in the Bible. Jesus shows up everywhere. Chapter 5 introduces us to the main character of the book, Jesus Christ. He is portrayed in two poetic images, a conquering lion, and a lamb that was slain. I know the lion/lamb imagery is a little weird. In fact, most of the imagery after chapter 3 of Revelation is a little weird and it reads more like a science fiction novel than a book of the Bible.

Because Revelation is so weird and it has so many bizarre images in it, Christians over the centuries haven't known quite what to do with it. So before we begin looking at the text, I want to give you a few interpretive grids to help us understand how to read Revelation. Think of them like the Benjamin Franklin

glasses in the movie, “National Treasure.” This is information that will help us see what God wants us to see in this book.

## **Background on Revelation**

### **Revelation is a letter and an apocalypse.**

The letter part of Revelation is the easiest part to understand. The first three chapters are letters to the seven churches. Interestingly, all seven letters were read in all seven churches. It is a little like John posting on his Facebook page for everyone to read. When you plot the order of these churches, you find they are given on a circular mail route that a courier would usually travel as he delivered mail. These are not all the churches in the area but only seven. Why did Christ choose only seven? We will learn more about that next week so come back for the rest of the story.

Not only is revelation an open letter to seven churches but it is an apocalypse. What is that? The apocalyptic genre was a type of writing that was popular for about 300 years around the time of Christ. It contains some pretty funky stuff. It has battle scenes, weird images and strange creatures. It takes a healthy dose of imagination to read it. One of the features of apocalyptic literature that is different from what we are accustomed to is the meaning in apocalyptic literature is primarily in the image more than the words. So as we read Revelation and some really freaky creatures described with multiple horns and multiple eyes, look for meaning in the weirdness. They are weird for a reason. Come back next week and learn more of the significance of Revelations weirdness.

Something else we need to remember about apocalyptic literature is that it has a common theme. This is it. “A hero is coming.” We live in a world where it is always winter and never Christmas. The theme of apocalyptic literature, Revelation in particular, is that Aslan is on the move. He is coming to destroy the wicked witch. He is coming to smash into history, crush Satan, destroy his armies and put things right. Now you know where C.S. Lewis picked up his Chronicles of Narnia theme, the book of Revelation.

**Revelation only makes sense if you know your Old Testament.**

This is super important. There is no other New Testament book that quotes the Old Testament more than the book of Revelation. What makes it a little tricky is very few of the quotations are direct word for word quotations. Revelation is filled with phrase, concept and theme quotations. So depending how you look at it, Revelation contains between 400 to 2,000 quotations of the Old Testament. Almost every sentence of the book is lifted from the Old Testament. Revelation has references to Genesis, Exodus, Judges, 1 + 2 Samuel, 1 + 2 Kings, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah. There is absolutely no way Americans can read this book and understand it unless they have a good pair of Old Testament glasses on.

**Revelation was written to help believers under attack.**

We have to go back and look at the original audience. Revelation was written to Asian Christians living under Roman brutality. Satan was working hard to separate the bride of Christ from Christ her groom. In Revelation, we find three ways he does this.

- Physical threat
- Spiritual deception
- Material seduction.

We see those strategies of Satan in the letters to the churches in the first three chapters and in Revelation 12-19 where the beast from the sea represents the physical threats, the beast from the land - later called the false prophet - represents spiritual deception and the harlot represents the seduction of materialism.

Not only does this book unveil the schemes of Satan to destroy Christ's church, but it reveals the plan of God, through Christ, to strike back, save his church and destroy Satan. This is why the book is called, "The revelation of Jesus Christ." It is Christ's unveiling.

What does God want us to do with this knowledge? It is to fortify us in the battle. These Asian Christians were in a battle to keep their faith in tough times, in spiritually seductive times, and in culturally distracting times... and so are we. The letters to the churches in the first three chapters all close with this phrase, "To him who overcomes." What do those who overcome get? Read the last chapters; the New Heavens and the New Earth.

This is really important. Revelation is clear that some Christians will die for their faith. Folks, as Christian, expect life will be tough. Expect to be laughed at in school when you pray before you eat. Expect trouble. Too many Christians think being in the center of God's will is being comfortable. That is not biblical. Being in the center of God's will often means being faithful to Christ in tough

times. That is not easy. As Christians, we should expect to follow in the path of Christ. What that means is expect that Satan's plans for us are to destroy us and persecute us and we may even be martyred. But here is the good news folks, if God's plan for us involves dying for our faith, we will follow the path of Christ after life, not just in life. Christ will bring us home to heaven and reward us for our faithfulness.

Christ said it. *In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.*

Revelation is to help Christians under the attack of Satan stay faithful to the end. This is something all of us need to hear. In some parts of the world Christians are under head-on attack through the persecution of violent governments. In other parts of Christendom, Satan's attack is the spread of the gangrenous infection of spiritual error in a congregation or denomination. In other churches, Satan's weapon of choice is financial success and material comfort. That results in a compromised, passionless, sacrifice free Christianity that is nothing more than a shell. In every place and time Satan is using one of these strategies to attack the church. Which one is he using on you today? The path to success in Revelation is clinging to our champion. Jesus, the hero who will return.

**We have a hero.**

Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Revelation 5:1–4 (ESV)

The first picture we get is God the Father seated on a throne and in his hand is a scroll. If we were in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, this would make a lot more sense. They didn't have a Bible in the form we do. Guttenberg only invented the printing press 500 years ago. Back then, if you wanted to read something, you needed a scroll. Interestingly, this scroll is written inside and on the back. It was very unusual to write on both sides of a scroll because the back side of vellum and parchment was rough and difficult to write on. One thing the Romans wrote on the back of was their title deeds or wills. So when we see it has writing on the back, this clues us in to knowing what the scroll contains. It contains the Father's will and plan for his creation.

Now while the Father has a great plan to redeem us, to transform us and to save us and to conquer Satan and sin, there is a problem. Nobody is qualified to carry it out. A plan may be a great plan but if nobody carries it out, it is a useless plan.

This is where we see John's pastoral heart. He is devastated. He is emotionally distraught. He is weeping. God has this great plan. God has people he wants to save, God has people he wants to love, heal and restore. God has a plan to vanquish Satan and evil conclusively but nobody can execute it.

Here is where the hero of our story is introduced.

And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. Revelation 5:5–6 (ESV)

Here are some Old Testament quotes and they are rich in meaning. The lion of the tribe of Judah comes from Genesis 49:8-9, the root of David is from Isaiah 11:1. Look those up, they are rich in meaning. Here comes our hero. Jesus has triumphed. Jesus alone can fulfill God's plan for the universe. Jesus alone can accomplish God's plans for human history.

How is Jesus portrayed? First, he is portrayed as a lion. What do lions do? They kill. They are ferocious, terrifying and strong. We don't call lions the king of the jungle without reason. The lion is the African killing machine, all steak and no vegetables. Nobody makes a lion eat his brussel sprouts. But there is the great juxtaposition. While Jesus is the conquering lion, when John looks, he sees a lamb that was slain.

Lambs are the exact opposite of a lion. Everyone loves a lamb. They are sweet, innocent and cute. If your kids can't get to sleep at night you have them count sheep; count lambs. Have them count lions and they will have nightmares, and need medication.

Lambs are talked about over 200 times in the Bible. What happens to lambs in the Bible? They die. In fact, in the temple there was literally a channel they had for the lamb's blood so it could run out of the temple and into the valley below because so many lambs died for sin. We learned in the book of Hebrews that the blood of bulls and sheep did not take away sin. It only foreshadowed the ultimate innocent lamb who would die and take away sin. Jesus Christ.

Remember what Jesus' freaky back-to-nature cousin, John the Baptist, said about Jesus when he saw him John 1:29, "Behold the lamb of God who

takes away the sin of the world.” You see, Jesus is the lion who can execute God’s plan of redemption because he conquered sin and Satan by being the lamb who was slain.

And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And 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. Revelation 5:7–8 (ESV)

What we have next is a series of responses. Because Jesus is worthy to execute the Father’s plan of redemption and conquer evil, the four living creatures and the 24 elders, who are the ceaseless worship leaders for God the Father, now begin worshipping the son because of who he is and what he has done. This is something very important for us. Heavens worship leaders see Jesus, and respond by worshipping. In fact, they respond by worshipping with a new song.

I have been thinking about our church’s services and I usually get up and preach about Jesus. I want us to see him and be amazed by him, but when I am done teaching, everyone walks out the door. I never give you a chance to respond to Christ in worship. The Biblical pattern is see Jesus, then worship him. This should be the rhythm of our worship on earth because it is the rhythm of worship in heaven. Guess what eternity will be like when we see Jesus face to face, an infinite being. There will always be something new to learn about Jesus. There will be something new to know about him every day, something more to learn, something more to respond to. We will never be done learning about Jesus and every time we learn something new about Jesus we will respond in



worship. Throughout this series, as we platform Jesus, we will end our time together in worship of Christ. It is the rhythm of the worship in heaven, I want to make it the rhythm of our worship on earth.

Something else I wanted us to notice is the decor of heaven. God is the interior decorator of heaven. He chose the way he wanted it set up and there is meaning here. From chapter 4 we learned God loves color. Great color in heaven. Great sound system in heaven, it rumbles like thunder from the throne. Flashes of lightning in heaven. Reminds me of a rock concert with flashing lights. It is not just the lighting in heaven that is impressive but there is singing and instruments in heaven. In heaven God wants there to be new songs.

Sometimes people ask me if I like hymnals. I like hymnals but if I was designing them I would have them all be three ring binders because there is no way to add new songs to a hymnal. New worship songs rise out of new events and experiences with God. Moses and the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, Miriam decided it was time to write a new song. Jesus takes the scroll from the Father, the worship leaders of heaven decide it is time for a new song. If you only sing old songs you miss capturing what God is still doing.

Probably my favorite imagery is the golden bowls of incense filled with the prayers of the saints. You will need some imagination to get this one. We have great color, lighting, sound, and worship in heaven but up to this point our nose is doing nothing. The nose is important.

How many of the single women walk into the apartment of a single man and give it the sniff test? It can be an instant date killer if the guy doesn't pass

the sniff test. How many of you men are totally engrossed in football but suddenly you smell a woman in the room? God cares about fragrance. Potpourri was God's idea long before it was ours. This is why we shower, bathe and use deodorant. By the way, if you don't do those things, that is your application point for today's sermon. Write it down.

Certain smells make us happy and other smells make us sick to our stomach. In the presence of God there is a beautiful sweet smelling fragrance. What is it? It is our prayers. Some of us wonder if when we pray God hears us. We wonder if his inbox is full. Some of us are so deep into the sovereignty of God that we don't even bother praying because we think it won't matter because God will do what he wants to do anyway. Put the sovereignty of God aside for a moment and realize that our prayers are the very fragrance of the throne room of heaven. Do our prayers matter? Yes! At the very least, our prayers are the aroma of heaven.

Another interesting thing we notice is Jesus made us a kingdom and priests to our God. In the Old Testament, the priest was a high, sacred, holy, set-apart, special, religious vocation. What a priest would do was mediate between God and the people. They would bring the truth of God's Word and teach people about God then the priest would bring the prayers and petitions of God's people to God. Jesus is our ultimate high priest. He is our ultimate mediator but we're participants with God in his work on the earth. For us, it feels like we are doing dishes, it feels like we are going to school, it feels like we're going to work, it feels like we're raising kids, it feels like we are talking with our neighbors at the

mailbox but really what we are doing is bridging God to people and people to God. The priest's job is a very special job and that is the job Christ gave us to do. We are a kingdom of priests.

It is not just the four living creatures and the 24 elders who worship Jesus but, as we learned a few weeks ago, the circle expands. The voice of many angels numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands start worshipping Jesus. I told you before that I went to public school so I can't do the math on that number but it sounds like a lot. This is serious worship in heaven when they discover Jesus, the lion triumph by being a lamb and has taken the scroll.

By the way, it says that when they worshipped, they did it with a loud voice, which seems appropriate to me. Too many people worship with their mouth closed or in a whisper. To me, that doesn't sound like worship at all. People play their head phones loud on their iPods. They air guitar in the shower loud. Singing with a loud voice to Jesus in church, the one who triumphed and is worthy to carry out the Father's plan of redemption, sounds like something much more important to get loud about.

The circle continues to expand. Worship gets bigger. Every creature in heaven and on earth worships Jesus. Friends, you and I were created to give our affections and attention to something. It will be a girlfriend or a boyfriend or some day a mate. It will be a job. It may be a political party and for most of us it is a college sports team in Iowa. What do we do? We scream, we shout, we sit on the edge of our seats. We get emotionally involved. We are filled with

passion. Nothing wrong with getting excited and giving ourselves to any of those things, I hate to break it to you, just expect to be disappointed. Your team will lose. Your spouse will fail you. Your girlfriend will break your heart. When they do, you will realize nothing is all it's cracked up to be, except for Jesus. He is the one who will never fail us. This whole thing inside us to cheer and shout in a sports stadium. This whole thing where we love to dance and raise our hands at a rock concert. This whole love thing where we are sold out to something or someone where we want to be with them so much, there is nothing wrong with those emotions. God gave us those passions. Just expect that everything you pour them out to, will fail you, except for Jesus. That means he is worth getting more excited about, more juiced up over, more passionate and love sick for than anything else. He won't fail us. He conquered sin and Satan. He is the only one worthy to take the scroll.

When the four creatures and 24 elders saw Jesus, they couldn't help but get excited and worship Him. When all the angels saw Jesus for who he is and what he did, they started cheering and shouting in worship and they did it with a loud voice. Every living creature that sees Jesus for who he is and what he did can't help but worship him with every fiber in their being.

This morning, it only seems appropriate that we respond by worshipping Jesus now that we have seen him for who he is. I am not going to tell you life will be easy if you worship Jesus. I am not going to tell you your depression will lift or a \$10,000 check will arrive in the mail. Whatever God chooses to do with our lives to allow us to honor him, that's his business. It is our business to worship

him for what he did and to do it with more energy and enthusiasm that we would for a football game.

In Revelation, it says the elders fell down and worshipped. As we worship, it seems posture is important. I'm not going to tell you to raise your hands in worship, but it is a good idea. I am not going to tell you to get on your knees in worship, but it is a good idea. I am not going to tell you to close your eyes, but it is a good idea. I am not going to tell you what posture to have in worship or how loud to sing, but posture and volume do say something about who we worship. This is our chance to adore and worship Jesus. During this last song, and after the service, we have communion tables and an elder at each table if you would like to take communion in your worship of Jesus. If you are going through a tough time in your life with circumstances beyond your control or you are facing temptations and depressions, come up front after the service and cast your cares before Christ and take communion with an elder as you turn to Jesus.

### Prayer

Jesus, thanks so much for getting off of your exalted throne. Even though you are a lion, thank you for humbling yourself to take on human flesh in Bethlehem. Thank you for dying on a cross for our sin, to be the lamb who was slain. Thank you for humbling yourself, conquering Satan, death and sin and being the only one in the universe who is worthy to take the scroll and execute the Father's good plans for creation. Thank you that today the tomb is quite empty and that when you said, "It is finished, it truly was." Thank you that when you returned to heaven, you aren't just sitting there but your word says that you are preparing a place for us. We look forward to that day when we will see you face to face. Now as a response to who you are and what you have done, we join the universal wide chorus that worships you. Amen



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