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He Holds the Scroll of History

The Apocalypse is good news for those in Christ Jesus.

As we continue making our way through the last book of the Bible, through what the apostle John calls “The Revelation of Jesus Christ,” through what John literally calls “The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ,” the breaking through from hiddenness of Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ about Jesus Christ, we come to the part of the book where, so to speak, things shift into high gear, and the action becomes much more animated and fast-paced.

In the text before us today, we come to the part of the book where most people stop reading and where most preachers stop preaching! I understand why. Most people will do what we have done over the past months: work our way through chapters 1–5 and then jump to chapters 21–22. And then move on to some other book of the Bible.

Understandably so! Beginning with Revelation 6:1, the imagery and symbolism start to come at us so intensely that we can begin to feel overwhelmed, confused, and frightened. Many stop reading because they are afraid to keep reading.

But making us feel afraid is not John’s or Jesus’ intention. Jesus does not give John, the churches of Asia Minor, and us his Apocalypse to frighten us. He gives his Apocalypse to help us keep our balance. He gives us his Apocalypse to fuel hope. Which says to me that if after reading the part of the book most people skip, if after reading Revelation 6–20, we find ourselves afraid, we have not read it correctly.

The fact is, beginning with Revelation 6:1, we move into the part of the last book of the Bible that most helps us make sense of what is going on in the world today. Which is why we are not going to do as most people do; we are not going to stop reading. We are going to press on as best we can, in the confidence that Jesus will accomplish in us the purpose for which he bothered to give John his Apocalypse.

Before reading the text let me remind you of the context. John sees a door open in heaven. Revelation 4:1. And calls us to see it too: “Look! A door open in heaven.” And the first thing he sees is a throne with someone sitting on it! The Throne of the Universe ... with someone sitting on it! Occupied. John then sees around the Throne 24 other thrones and seated on them 24 elders, representing all the redeemed people of God.

And John sees around the Throne four living creatures, representing all of creation. And John sees in the right hand of the One who sits on the Throne of the Universe a scroll, with writing all over it, inside and outside. Clearly, it is a scroll of immense importance. It is sealed, as many top-secret documents were and are. It is sealed with seven seals.

It turns out that the scroll is the scroll of history. It contains the secrets of history. John hears what he calls a strong angel call out in a loud voice: “Who is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals?” Who has what it takes

to open up the meaning of history? And John learns the devastating answer: “No one.” No one—in heaven or on the earth or under the earth—was able to open the scroll and look in it. And John says he wept and wept.

Then one of the elders around the Throne tells John to stop weeping. Why? Because it turns out there is someone who can open the scroll. “Look,” says the elder, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah has overcome so as to open the scroll and its seven seals.” Wonderful news! We do not have to be in the dark about history! The Lion can open the scroll. John then sees—to his great surprise—a Lamb, in the center of the Throne. Not a Lion? No. A Lamb. “A Lamb as if slain,” is how he puts it. The Lion has overcome by becoming a sacrificial Lamb. The Lion has overcome by handing himself over to all that seeks to destroy life—to sin, evil, and death. The Lion has overcome by sacrificing himself for the life of the world.

Then comes a truly astonishing moment. John says that the Lamb, the little Lamb, Mary’s little Lamb, took the scroll out of the right hand of him who sits on the Throne! The Lamb just takes the scroll of history into his own hand. When he does, all of creation bursts into celebration. “Worthy are You to take the scroll!” Why? Because “You were slain.” Not because he was resurrected, not because he created all things, not because he is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but because he was slain. What makes him, Jesus Christ, worthy to take the scroll and open its seals is that he gives himself on a cross for the life of the world. He is worthy because he is crucified for the sin of the world.

Then we come to the part of the book where things shift into high gear.

(Read Revelation 6:1–8:4)

A drama, not a newspaper

It is critical to realize and remember what we are reading in this part of the last book of the Bible. We are not reading a newspaper account of identifiable events. For what we read in this part of the last book of the Bible helps us interpret what we read in the newspaper. As did the *Globe & Mail* in September of last year. I showed you the political cartoon at the beginning of this series. The United Nations meets in General Assembly. And the PowerPoint presentation has four horses on stage. The so-called “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” The *Globe & Mail* newspaper uses the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ to interpret what the United Nations was facing in September and is facing today. But the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ is not a newspaper.

What we have in the last book of the Bible is a drama, a dramatic play, which Jesus put on for John on the prison island of Patmos. What we have is an animated film Jesus produced and played for John, and through John for us. Jesus was way ahead of the creative curve. In 96 A.D. Jesus wrote and directed a blockbuster movie long before anyone dreamed of such technology. Jesus put on a full-length live drama. In five acts, with many scenes in each act. With all kinds of characters, some in very strange costumes. And with all kinds of special effects!

Jesus could have conveyed his message without the special effects. It is, after all, already given to us in the other 65 books of the Bible. But Jesus conveys the message with the special effects to help us feel the message and so that the message sticks in our imaginations.

We are not reading a newspaper; we are reading a dramatic play, or more accurately, we are reading John’s retelling of the play. That is, we are reading John’s description of the imagery, symbolism, and special effects Jesus uses, not the actual reality being imagined and symbolized.

In chapter 5, Jesus presents himself as a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. Is that how he actually appears

right now? When we enter the heavenly court and meet the risen Jesus, will we see a Lamb? Will we see a figure with seven horns and seven eyes? No, thank God! We will see a human being ... *the* human being. Seven horns and seven eyes are symbols: horns, the symbol of strength; eyes, the symbol of wisdom; seven, the number of completeness, of perfection. The slain Lamb is immensely strong and immensely wise.

In chapter 6, in the sixth seal, Jesus uses the special effect of a great earthquake shaking the earth, and he has the sun become black as sackcloth, the moon becomes like blood, and the stars of the sky fall to earth. John is describing the imagery and symbolism Jesus uses, not the actual reality being imagined and symbolized.

God has used such imagery and symbolism before, in the Old Testament prophets. The earthquake—Haggai 2:6. The sun black, the moon like blood—Joel 2:31. Stars falling from heaven like figs from a tree—Isaiah 34:4. The sky rolled up like a scroll—Isaiah 34:4. John is not telling us that one day we are going to witness particular, identifiable phenomena. The special effects in the play, in the animated film, point beyond themselves. So also, we are not going to one day see four giant horses galloping through the streets of our city. The special effects point beyond themselves to realities we already see in our cities.

So, what is the message of all the imagery and symbolism and special effects in Revelation 6–8? Here is my best attempt to summarize it. Things are happening because of prayer. The message of the breaking of the seven seals of the scroll of history is that things are happening in the world because of prayer. Not only because of prayer. Things are happening because of decisions humans are making. Things are happening because of decisions spiritual forces are making. Things are happening because the Living God who sits on the Throne is acting. But the big point of the breaking of the seven seals is that things are happening because someone prays.

This is clearly the message of the seventh seal. John says that when the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Why silence? Apparently even the everlasting song, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” ceases. Why the silence? In order, says John, to gather up all the prayers of the saints. The final act of the great drama does not take place until all the prayers of the people of God are gathered before the Throne.

What happens in the seventh seal is the clue to the meaning of the other six seals. In each seal, someone prays.

Seal one—“Come,” says the first living creature.

Seal two—“Come,” says the second living creature.

Seal three—“Come,” says the third living creature.

Seal four—“Come,” says the fourth living creature.

Seal five—“How long, O Lord?” cry the martyrs under the altar.

Seal six—“Fall on us and hide us,” say those who are resisting the kingdom of the Lamb to the mountains and the rocks.

Things are happening because of prayer.

The wrath of the Lamb

Now, in order to more fully appreciate the message of this part of the last book of the Bible, we need to grapple with two key words in the text. One is *wrath*. The other is *given* or *granted*.

First phrase: “the wrath of the Lamb.” In seal six, John tells us that Jesus portrays “the kings of the earth” and others, hiding themselves in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They cry out to the mountains and the rocks—Revelation 6:16—“Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.”

“The wrath of the Lamb.” An oxymoron if there ever was one! The Lamb gave his life for the life of the world. How can anyone then speak of the Lamb having wrath? The Lamb shed his blood for the sin of the world. The Lamb shed his blood to purchase sinners. What then is this “wrath of the Lamb”? It is good news.

The person who has helped me the most to make sense of the whole idea of wrath is Leon Morris of Australia. I had the privilege of studying under him for a term. Morris writes this: “The wrath of God is often confused with that irrational passion we so frequently find in man and which was commonly ascribed to heathen deities” (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p. 149). But, says Morris, God’s wrath is not like that. God’s wrath “denotes not so much a sudden flaring up of passion which is soon over, as a strong and settled opposition to all that is evil, arising out of God’s very nature” (p. 180).

God’s wrath is “a burning zeal for the right coupled with a perfect hatred for everything that is evil” (p. 209). Is that not good news? “The wrath of the Lamb.” The Lamb sheds his blood for sinners. The message of Revelation 7 is that the Lamb seals his own with his blood. The Lamb so loves sinners that he dies to free them from the grip of sin and make them his own. And then sets out to rid our lives and the world of everything that is contrary to his loving purposes. In his love for us and for the world, the Lamb works to get rid of all that keeps us and the world from experiencing the full blessing of his love.

Oh, what good news! Jesus Christ the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world will not tolerate for long that which gets in the way of his loving purposes. In my life, in your life, in the life of his church, in the life of the city. His perfect love is matched by his perfect hatred of all that is unloving. He will come against anything that destroys his creative work in our lives. And I love him for it!

Granted our will

Now how, according to the last book of the Bible, does he express his wrath? The second phrase with which we need to grapple: *given* or *granted*. In seal one, John says that “a crown was given” to the white horse. In seal two, John says of the red horse, “it was granted to take peace from the earth,” and “a great sword was given” to the horse. In seal four, John says that “authority was given” to the ashen horse, whose name is Death. “Given.” “Granted.”

By whom? By the One who sits on the Throne. By the Lamb who holds the scroll. Why? The nature of wrath. Not lightning bolts and thunder, although it can feel like lightning bolts and thunder. Wrath is not expressed in outbursts of anger and rage. It is expressed in letting us have our way so that we will no longer choose our way. We are “given” our way so that we no longer will want our way. If we do not want the Lamb to run our lives, if we do not want to follow his apparently weak and foolish ways, he grants us the consequences of our way. If we want to live out our unchecked greed, then greed will consume us. If we want to nurse our lusts, then we will be eaten up by our lusts. If we want to exalt and celebrate violence, then we will die by violence. If we oppress others, we will be oppressed. If we seek to deceive others, we will end up being deceived. If we do not want the Lamb to reign in the world, then all that is out of sync with the Lamb will surface in the world. It was “given” to the horses. Not because this is God’s will for the world. But because if we do not want God’s will for the world, God lets us have our will for the world.

So, to the message of the seven seals. In seals one to four the living creatures, representing all of creation, say, “Come!” First living creature, “Come!” Second living creature, “Come!” Third living creature, “Come!” Fourth living creature, “Come!” And the four horsemen of the Apocalypse appear. What is going on in this part of the drama? Creation is crying out, “Come!” Is creation calling for the four horsemen? No. Why would creation want the four horsemen to come? Then for whom is creation calling? For Jesus Christ. Creation is calling for the Savior to come!

The last book of the Bible is bracketed by the verb *come*. In the opening chapter of the drama, John says of Jesus Christ, “Look! He is coming” (1:7). In the closing chapter of the drama, Jesus says three times, “I am coming.” “Look! I am coming” (22:7). “Look! I am coming” (22:12). “Yes, I am coming” (22:20). And in the closing chapter, three times we hear the call to “come.” “Come,” says the bride of Christ (22:17). “Come,” says the Spirit of Christ (22:17). “Amen, come, Lord Jesus,” says John (22:20).

The four living creatures, representing all of creation, are echoing the great prayer of the whole book. “Come! Come, Lord Jesus.” “Come!” “Come!” “Come!” “Come!” Then why the four horsemen? Because as Jesus begins to answer the prayer of creation and begins to come, things begin to happen. His coming to the world surfaces all that is in the way of his coming. His coming surfaces all that is inconsistent with his kingdom. And he is resisted, and that resistance is messy.

Oh, wonderful things begin to happen. People’s lives are changed. People are healed. People are reconciled. People find peace in the soul. People are born again. But when his coming is resisted, other things also begin to happen.

We experience this in our own lives, do we not? And we experience this in the life of our church. He comes and begins to manifest all the blessings of his love. And then “stuff” begins to surface. And we resist him messing with the “stuff,” and things get messy.

The riders and the seals

“Come!” cries the first living creature. And a rider on a white horse appears. He has a bow in his hand, a crown is given to him, and he goes out conquering. The first rider is imitating Jesus the true King. In the 19th chapter of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, we meet a rider on a white horse, who is clearly Jesus. In the sixth chapter, we meet a counterfeit. We meet the forces in the world that do not want the Lamb to rule. White—masquerading as light. They go out “conquering,” seeking to dominate others, to bring others under their rule.

The second rider naturally follows on the heels of the first. John says, “It was granted to him to take peace from the earth.” Red—the symbol of blood. As powers that resist the Lamb seek to assert themselves in the world, there is war. All over the world, war. Not because the Lamb wills war, but because resistance to the way of the Lamb leads to war.

The third rider naturally follows on the heels of the second. John says the one who sat on the black horse “had a pair of scales in this hand” (6:5) and cries out: “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine” (6:6). When people seek to conquer others, when violence and war take place, food has to be weighed out and rationed. And usually some people get ripped off. A denarius was a day’s wage. A quart of wheat for a day’s wage? Three quarts of barley, the bare necessity, for a day’s wage? Yet the price of oil and wine are protected? The third rider embodies greed and injustice, leading to hunger and famine.

The fourth rider naturally follows on the heels of the other three. An ashen horse because the one who sits on it is named Death and Hades. An awful picture of an awful reality. Death rides through the earth, and Hades, the Grave, now personified, gathers up the corpses.

Again, what is going on in the opening of the seals? Creation and church are praying for Jesus Christ to come. And he is coming. And he is bringing his kingdom of light, love, and life. And he is being resisted. The rise in violence in our society is directly due to humanity resisting the Lamb and his nonviolent ways. As long as our societies continue to glorify violence in all the ways we do, the world will continue to suffer violence.

As seal one is broken, we discover that if we resist the way of the Lamb there will a greater and greater urge to conquer. As seal two is broken, we discover that if we resist the way of the Lamb there will be greater and greater conflict. As seal three is broken, we discover that if we resist the way of the Lamb there will be greater and greater injustice and hunger. As seal four is broken, we discover that if we resist the way of the Lamb there will be greater and greater sickness and death.

Are disciples of Jesus spared all this? I wish I could say yes! I wish I could tell us that Jesus says we are spared all this. But he does not. For when we connect with the Lamb and when we dare to go his way, we get caught up in all the mess. So seal five. John sees underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of their allegiance to the Lamb. Why underneath the altar? Because that is where the blood of the sacrificial animals ended up. "Under the altar" is Jesus' way of declaring that the death of his followers is somehow a priestly act, a sacrificial act, and has redemptive consequences for the world.

Nearly 30 million disciples of Jesus were martyred in the 20th century. Bruce Milne cites a projection by some missiologists that in this century 1 out of every 200 disciples will die for Jesus. This text is saying that through all of these deaths the kingdom of God is breaking into the world. In seal five, the martyrs cry out, "How long, O Lord?" How long, indeed? How long will you put up with resistance to you and your kingdom? How long will you be patient with the injustice, violence, and greed? Why do you delay your coming? Why not simply assert your way? Because God's way is the way of the Lamb, not the way of the Lion. God's way is the way of sacrificial love, not the exertion of superior power.

But when the Lamb breaks the sixth seal, do we not see God exerting superhuman force? "And there was an earthquake," says John, and the sun became black, and the moon like blood, and the stars fell to earth out of the sky. Is this not God slamming the world? No. It is God letting the world have the consequences of its choice to ignore him and his way.

In the sixth seal, the whole cosmos is collapsing. Not because God is shaking it. But because it is imploding in on itself under the weight of humanity's choice to go its own way. Which is why the people in the sixth seal call on the mountains to fall on them. They do not call on God; they do not call on the Lamb to save them. They do not want God; they do not want the Lamb to save them. So they call on the collapsing cosmos to finish them off so that they do not have to face God and the Lamb.

Which is one of the saddest parts of the last book of the Bible. All we have to do is turn toward the Lamb. There is no refuge from the Lamb, but there is refuge in the Lamb. He has given himself for the life of the world. All we have to do is turn and embrace his scandalous love. Instead of praying to the mountains and the rocks, all we have to do is pray to the Lamb, "Hide me in your love."

Conclusion

So, what is the message of the breaking of the seven seals? Things are happening because of prayer. The discipleship implication then is very clear: keep praying. Join creation and keep praying, “Come! Come, Lord Jesus!” Thomas Torrance of Scotland sums it up so well: “The real cause of the world-disturbance is the prayer of the church.” The prayers of the disciples of the Lamb:

[A]re the most potent, most disturbing, most revolutionary, most frightening power that the world knows. Would to God we in Christ’s church really understood the power of prayer like that! It is through prayer that the Spirit of God comes upon the church in tongues of fire. It is through prayer that Satan falls like lightning to the ground. It is through prayer that the voice of the gospel thunders through the clouds of darkness. ... All history moves at the impulse of prayer. The real initiative is not held by the riders on the white, red, black, and pale horses, but by the saints under the altar. (*Apocalypse Today*, 73–74)

Which is why I love the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus gives us what Blaise Pascal called “the dignity of causality.” When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, things happen. “Your kingdom come” is not, as many people take it to mean, “Let us bring in your kingdom.” We cannot bring in the kingdom of God; we are not God! Only God can. Jesus teaches us to pray to his Father, “Your Kingdom come.” You Father, you make your kingdom come. Only you can make it come. So Father, do it. Bring in your kingdom of light and love and life. Please.”

So, allow me to lead us in praying the Lord’s Prayer in light of what we have learned in the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ.

O Father. O Father, you are on the Throne of the Universe.

Hallow your name in all the earth. Make yourself known in all the earth. Only you can do it. Only you can make you known. How long, O Lord, until the whole world knows you and your love? Please, dear God, manifest yourself in our city!

Your kingdom come in all the earth. Only you can make it happen. We are willing to cooperate with you in any way we can. But only you can make it happen. How long, O Lord, will you endure other kingdoms that are so out of sync with yours? How long will you put up with injustice and evil? Please dear God, bring in the kingdom of healing and peace in our city.

Your will be done on earth. Only you can do your will. We can try, but we are not you. Only you can accomplish your good pleasure. So do it, please. Do not let us have our will. We do not know how to make life work. Please, dear God, cause your creative and redemptive will to be done in our city.

Give us this day our daily bread. You do, every day. You bless the earth and make it bring forth abundance. But the resources get hoarded. Oh dear God, break the systems of greed that keep so much of the world in need. You are the good Father who delights to care for his children. Please dear God, make it so that everyone gets to eat at your table.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Now we are praying! For only you can forgive sins. Which you have chosen to do in Jesus the Lamb. You have made full provision for forgiveness in his cross. We confess that we are sinners. Saints in Jesus, yes, but still sinners. Wipe the slate clean again, cleanse us to the bones. And then, dear God, enable us to forgive others. Please dear God, take away the need in the human heart for vengeance. Heal the resentments in the souls of our people.

And Father, you have to *help us in the face of temptation*. We are no match for temptation. We try, but we simply do not have what it takes. You have to help us.

And you have to *protect us from the Evil One*. We are definitely no match for him. We are toast without your help. O Lord, how long until you finally get rid of the Evil One? Jesus has already won the victory over him. How long will you let him move in the world? Please, dear God, finally destroy the Enemy.

This we pray in the name of the Lamb. This we pray for the greater glory of the Lamb. This we pray because we believe the Lamb gets the last word.

Amen.

Darrell Johnson

Scripture: [Revelation 6:1-8:4](#)

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