
Lion and the Lamb

In Revelation 5, John, the author of Revelation, shares with us a vision that he is seeing. In his vision he has been invited to observe what is happening in heaven, in God's throne room. In this chapter, God is seated on the throne, and in his hand is a scroll that has seven seals on it. The seal contains the decrees of God that will shape the rest of history, both in heaven and on earth. Because the scroll is sealed, however, someone must be found who is qualified to break open the wax seals and thus enact what has been written there.

The question is put to all who are gathered there: who is worthy to break the seals and enact God's decrees? No one comes forward and no nominations are made. This saddens John so deeply that he weeps uncontrollably. This was especially disconcerting for him because of his situation and the situation of the church. John had been exiled to a distant island by the Roman courts, a punishment that was almost as bad as a death sentence. The church which remained on the mainland was suffering greatly because of persecution, and unless God stepped in, it, along with the gospel entrusted to it, would be destroyed. Only God's decrees could stop the powerful evil forces at play in the world, but, as John tells us, no one seemed to be qualified or worthy to break the seals. God's decrees would go unenacted.

Seeing him weeping uncontrollably, one of the twenty-four elders (representing the entirety of God's people, Old Testament and New Testament), told John to stop weeping, for someone had been found who was worthy to open the scroll. The elder tells John that "the Lion of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

This description of the one who is worthy to open the scroll brings to mind the prophecies of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, we learn that God was going to send a Messiah, one he had anointed to bring salvation to the world, and that through this Messiah God would make right the wrongs of this world and bring things to the end he desired. We know, further, that this Messiah would be a descendant of David, of royal lineage. The elder also calls the Messiah the Lion of Judah. Throughout the ancient world images of lions were found in places of great power, as is appropriate, for in the ancient world there was no animal more powerful than the lion.

Lions are also intimidating, for they can destroy life in a few seconds. They were used by the Romans in the amphitheatre to put to death those who were believed worthy of execution. The crowds thronged to the theatre to watch these blood spectacles which included the killing of Christians who refused to recant. John was well aware of these atrocities, and the fact that the one who was able to cause history to move forward was a lion who would stalk and destroy those who stood against God and his people.

If John's vision would have stopped there, the implications for the church would have been far different from what they are now. If it were true that the Messiah, Jesus, were only a lion, the way forward would have been to tear the throats and crush the bones of those who stood in opposition to God.

This is the way of the world. How do powerful nations become powerful? They overpower weaker nations and take what belongs to others for themselves. Should a weaker nation resist, the more powerful nation

will send its armies, usually justifying itself in some way, and, after eliminating resistance, they will take what doesn't belong to them. Powerful nations always put two options before those from whom they intend to take. Option 1: Give it to us. Option 2: Resist, and we will beat you up, and then we will take it from you. This has been true throughout the centuries. This is how the Roman Empire became richer and more powerful. It is how the nations of Europe became rich and more powerful during the days of colonization. And it is how the powerful nations of the world today become richer and more powerful. They act like lions, preying upon those who are weaker and bullying them if they show resistance.

If God's Messiah had come as a lion, this is what we could expect of the church. But that is not what we see. As soon as the announcement is made that there is someone worthy to open the scrolls, and that this worthy person is of regal descent and is one of great power, the next thing John sees is "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain." This Lamb has the appearances of being defeated, but yet lives. We know, of course, that this Lamb is none other than our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ who came to give his life as a sacrifice for sinners. It was in his death that he won the victory over the powers of evil. It was in his sacrifice that he continues to be victorious.

Scholars who have given great thought to this part of John's vision, note how absolutely jarring and unexpected the appearance of the Lamb who appears to have been slain is. The decrees of God are going to be carried out, not by a lion who crushes and destroys but by a Lamb, the most helpless of animals, who has died on a cross at the hands of an earthly lion.

And this shapes the demeanour and task of the church. Instead of finding its work in crushing others, the church, following Jesus Christ, finds its work in following Jesus in sacrifice. The power of the church is not found in its institutions and in its placement of its people in positions of authority and power. The power of the church is found in the gospel, the story of Jesus who gave his life for sinners. The power of the church is not found in declaring its rights and privileges but in giving its life for the sake of others.

This message is easily lost by the church and by those who claim to be acting in the name of Jesus Christ. In centuries and places where Christianity was the majority and when positions of power were held by those who identified with the Christian faith, the church acted in the same way as the powerful nations of the world, exerting its control and demanding of people that they submit or be destroyed. When the church is weak, however, it can no longer use the ways of the world to advance its purposes (perhaps instead of the purposes of God), and it is forced to being a lamb (powerless and helpless) instead of a lion (dominating and destructive), thus following Jesus in his sacrifice.

To be powerful, Jesus did not come as a lion, although, truth be told, that could have been the way God got rid of sin from this world. God could have sent a lion among sinners, tearing out their throats and crushing their bones, but he did not. He sent a Lamb, and that Lamb, in succumbing to the lion in his death but being raised to new life by God the Father, became more powerful than any lion and established an eternal Kingdom marked by reconciliation and peace.

The power of the church, those who follow Jesus Christ, again, is not dependent on its ability to rule but in its willingness to sacrifice. The church grows as the followers of Jesus Christ recognize that when they are weak, Jesus Christ can be strong through them. And when the sacrificial Lamb does his work, it is then that we see the Kingdom come and God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

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