**YOU HAVE MADE THEM A KINGDOM AND PRIESTS**

January 7, 2018

Revelation 5:1-14

Key Verse 5:10 “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

As we wait for Jesus’ glorious second coming, we struggle with many things. Jesus promised that we will be victorious over evil. But the reality is different. We struggle with many unanswered questions. When is Satan going to be stopped? When are the ungodly going to be stopped? When is God going to intervene? When is righteousness and peace and joy going to prevail? John had the same questions. He saw the church grow beyond in Judea and then into Samaria and then into the outer most part of the world. Then he watched those churches decline and decline until Jesus wrote seven letters to them with some very harsh words. The church was not powerful. It was weak. The church was not changing the world. Five of those seven churches were on the brink of extinction, one way or another. And only two of them had any strength at all. He was wondering what would happen to churches. In verse 4, John wept and wept. We understand the sadness of his heart. It is really the sadness of God’s people through all the centuries. They are the tears of the children of Israel in bondage in Egypt as they felt the pain of the slavery and they cried to God in their affliction, the tears of the children of Israel who died in the wilderness and never saw the Promise Land, the tears of God’s elect through the centuries as they have cried on into Heaven and God has heard their cries, the cries that had been pouring out of their heart by the pain and sorrow and sadness and unfulfillment of life, the tears of all those who have looked on their silent dead and stood behind their bodies as they opened the grave to place them there, the tears of trial and suffering and heartache and pain and sorrow. They are all those tears all gathered up in John’s eyes, and he weeps for all of us. We are wondering, “Is the world always going to remain evil? Is it going to be this way forever? Perhaps we can never overcome.” No, Satan has been defeated, and the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we will reign with him in his kingdom. In today’s passage, God reveals to John the glorious vision of the heaven. It also tells us who we are: We are priests of God, serving our God and ruling the world. Our victory is assured. Paul says in Romans 8:37, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” May God bless you this year with the clear identity of who you are.

Look at verse 1. “Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.” The scene is Heaven. In the center of the scene is the throne of God on a crystal platform with diamond and ruby glory splendor, and an emerald rainbow, lightening and thunder and glorious worship from the hosts of Heaven. Now this particular scroll that John sees in the vision is written inside and on the back, and then rolled up and sealed with seven seals rolled a little bit and sealed, rolled a little more and sealed. Now this gives us a clue as to what it is. Roman wills were sealed seven times. This is God’s last will and testament. This is God holding out the title deed to the universe. This was typical of a contract in the ancient world. They would write the details of the contract on the inside and then would write a summary of the contract on the outside so that one would know what it was all about. So you could generally know what it was about by seeing what was written on the back of it. But you really couldn't understand the fullness until you were able to unroll it seal by seal by seal.

Look at verse 2. “I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?’” Who can bring about what Paul in Romans 8 calls “the glorious adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies?” And the question is asked, “Who is worthy? Who is worthy?” Michael was there. He didn’t say anything even though he was super angel who had contended with Satan over the body of Moses, as Jude tells us. Gabriel was there. As glorious an angel as he was, given the privilege of announcement as to the birth of John the Baptist to Zacharias and Elizabeth, and then to Mary, and even to Joseph. Gabriel was there, but he doesn’t speak. And then there were 10,000 times 10,000 angels who were there and they didn’t say anything. Verse 3 says, “And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look into it.” Not even one. No one; no one in heaven, no one on earth, no one under the earth, no one. Anywhere and everywhere in the entire universe, and there was no one. From hell to heaven and all parts in between there was no one. No one to open it; no one to look and examine its contents. No one who had the legal right, no one who had the authority.

John began to weep. He was weeping because he wanted to see the world redeemed. He was weeping because he wanted to see the Kingdom come. He was weeping because he wanted to see the power of evil broken. He wanted to see retribution on Satan and demons. He wanted to see those who reject Christ to be judged. He wanted Christ to reign. And so he was weeping, and the elder says, “Do not weep.” He calls a stop to it in very straightforward and commanding tones. “Why? 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.” Look, John. There is someone. It is not an angel. It is not an elder. “Here is the lion from the tribe of Judah.” That is a title for Messiah taken out of Genesis 49:8-10. And it is designed to show the Messiah as threatening, as vicious, as destructive, as powerful, and strong. That is what the Jews expected. And that is one of the reasons why they rejected Christ the first time he came, because Jesus just was not like that. They expected the Messiah to come with ferocity. They expected the Messiah to come just destroying the ungodly, destroying the Romans who were enslaving them. They expected a fierce and destructive work by the Messiah. And when Jesus came, he was the lion, but he didn’t act like it. His lion-like work has yet to come. He will do that when he comes again. He was the lion of the tribe of Judah. But they did not know it, because his lion-like judgment still has yet to come.

Look at verse 6. “Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain.” The elder said, “The lion has triumphed. Look.” John immediately turns to see this great lion that has just been described to him, but he does not see a lion. He sees a lamb. And not just any lamb, but one with death wounds. John can see the blood and the open wounds with which he has been inflicted. What a shock it must have been for John to look for this great lion who would rip the seals with his great claws, only to see a small wounded lamb. But it is the lamb who walks up to the One seated on the throne and takes the scroll. Then all the hosts of heaven fall on their faces and worship the Lamb. It is an incredible and astonishing scene. How can a lion be a lamb? I don’t know. Here we see that his power was found in his death, because with his death he purchased the souls of people, and he was thereby made worthy to open the scroll. Here we see that God’s strength is disguised as weakness. Look at the Lamb of God dying on the cross. They taunted him and said, “Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” (Matt 27:40). The irony was that he was able to come down from the cross, but chose not to. What God was doing was the most powerful act that he would ever perform. Greater than the creation of the world, and greater than bringing the world to an end, Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was God at work in his greatest hour. His strength was hidden, but it was God’s most powerful moment. In this humble act of God, the devil was shamed and robbed of his power.

We are uncomfortable that Jesus asks us to join him in his weakness. He said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:29). We want to display power and have people see that we are on the winning side. It makes us feel important. Many people want to make friends with the rich and the famous. Actually, God could have won the world over through a consistent display of power. But then where would people’s hearts be? Would they love God for himself, or just for his power? Would they want God to use their lives, or would they want to use God for their own purposes? It was God’s wisdom that his power is displayed in weakness. Likewise our strength is found in weakness. The things that we see as limitations are the things which God is using to purify us and conform us into his likeness. Someone wrote: “The Lord sometimes leaves in us some defects of character in order that we should learn humility. For without them we would immediately soar above the clouds in our own estimation and would place our throne there.” St. Paul said, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Verse 7 says, “He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.” The appearance of the lamb taking that scroll means that Jesus Christ is taking the title deed to the universe and he will begin to break those seals immediately, in Chapter 6, and as each of them breaks, the sequence of steps takes places as he takes back the universe step by step, seal by seal by seal. The seventh seal is broken and the seventh trumpet is blown and then there will be loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” (Rev 11:15) Believe me; God would not give it to him if he didn’t deserve it. That is why Jesus could say in Matthew 28:18, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the Lamb. And they began to praise him. Look at verses 9-10. “And they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God 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.’” The redemption of the Lamb is truly great. Christ saves men from every tribe and language and people and nation. Christ saves people from Africa, Asia, Oceania, South America, Europe and North America. Christ’s changing power makes selfish people become sacrificial people, proud people become humble people, corrupted people become holy people. Christ’s redemption produces a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in fulfillment of God’s unchanging hope and purpose. 1 Peter 2:9,10 says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” We are a kingdom and priests in this world, reigning with Jesus. That is our identity. St. Paul said in Romans 15:16, “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” He saw himself as a priest, and he saw the Gentiles as holy offerings to bring them to God’s altar. When you look at Canadian students, who do you see? Do you see them as godless giants? Do you see them as hopelessly lost? Or do you see them as holy offerings to bring to God? If you see the students as godless giants who will crush you, then no amounts of money, no amounts of strategy will work. In 1987, I was lost in despair, not knowing what to do with my life since I lost the dream of becoming a great mathematician. But God called me to be his child and made me a Bible teacher for young people in this generation. In spite of my weaknesses, God has used me last 30 years. Even though I am a bad singer, I will participate in the heavenly chorus.

As the great redemption brought by the Lamb is revealed, another wave of praise and worship breaks forth. The angels in heaven, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand encircle the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sing: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Then another wave of praise breaks forth. Let’s read verses 13-14. “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: ‘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.”

Today we have caught a glimpse of the worship of God and of Christ in heaven. We thank God for giving us life and for redeeming us through his Son Jesus Christ so that we may participate in the heavenly worship. These days rapture theology is popular. The problem with rapture theology is that of defeatist mentality. They don’t think they can win the victory in this world against dark forces of evil. The world is too corrupt to be saved. People are too godless to be saved. So they are longing for Jesus to come and snatch them away from this evil world. For them, there is no hope in this world and we cannot overcome the evil. Rather than taking this defeatist mentality, we need to believe that Jesus already won the victory. We are priests in this world, and we are reigning spiritually with Jesus in this world. All our efforts will be successful in the end. It will never be in vain.