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REVELATION 5

CHRIST – OUR HOPE FOR THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD

In the Middle Ages ‘visual art’ was often ‘biblical art’ or ‘religious art’. Paintings would show scenes based on Bible stories. And especially scenes from the book of Revelation were remarkably popular. One such well-known piece is “the Lamb of God”, or “The Adoration of the Lamb of God”. It is a famous altar-piece, painted in 1432 by Jan van Eyk, and can be seen in the St. Bavo Cathedral in Ghent, Belgium.

It is called a polyptych, because it is painted on several panels, connected by hinges. When you have three panels, you call it a triptych, and with two panels you have a diptych. The fascinating thing is that you can look at the panels as separate paintings, but when it is unfolded the panels together show one painting.

You can look at Revelation 4 and 5 as a visionary diptych – two parts of one single magnificent vision of God’s glory. The first half of this diptych (Rev. 4) reveals God and praises him as the Creator and Ruler of the universe. The second half reveals God and praises him as the Redeemer, the Rescuer of his creation.

So when we shift our focus from the first to the second panel, we move from God’s power in creation to his power in re-creation. But always remember

that what we see in Rev. 5 is one vision with what we have seen in Rev. 4. It is still about the One who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever.

But there is also a difference. There is something new here. We come to see the key-role of Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection is the decisive event that brings about and will complete the redemption, the re-creation. God's work makes progress.

In our own time we may see how the Holy God continues to gather the church of Jesus Christ, with this perspective on its way to the New Jerusalem.

This happens here and in many other countries, in different cultures and under a great variety of circumstances. But what unites God's children throughout the world is the same perspective from above, the encouraging perspective of John's vision: God's work in the world makes progress. It will be completed and reach the goal of eternal and universal worship.

A MYSTERIOUS SCROLL

Scientists tell us that in our galaxy, the Milky Way, there are at least 100 billion planets. And many of these are said to be quite similar to our planet, which would suggest that our earth might be not as unique as we often think it is. This is, of course, a big boost for the search for life elsewhere in the universe, perhaps similar to our human life – who knows?! So far it is only wild speculation.

But there is also another side to this. When I read about those amazing discoveries, I cannot help but thinking how great our God is, how amazing is he, the Holy One, Creator of everything, this God whom we met in Revelation 4 as the Ruler of the universe, whose magnificent throne is in the centre of the heavenly sanctuary. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

The apostle John must have been overwhelmed. But then he sees something he had not noticed before, something small and inconspicuous that could easily be overlooked in the incredibly colourful brilliance and the abundant praise and worship that filled this huge heavenly sanctuary. He sees a scroll.

Why does this scroll catch his attention? Because he saw it *in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne*, God's right hand! Throughout the Bible God's right hand is the hand with which he does his powerful deeds. In Exodus 15 we read that "the LORD stretched out his right hand to shatter the enemy and deliver his people". And so it becomes a metaphor for God's just judgement and saving power.

But it is not only the location. As soon as John sees this scroll he notices two other details that make it even more mysterious. There was *writing within and on the back*, on both sides. This was unusual in the ancient world, but it tells us that all the writing-space was completely filled.

However, John could not read it. It says that this scroll was *sealed with seven seals*. Think again of the number seven. The scroll was completely sealed off. The content was classified, top-secret. Entirely hidden and not accessible!

And yet, that is not just it. It appears that God does not want to leave it like that. Most translations say that the scroll was "**in** God's right hand". But literally it says that the scroll was "**on** God's right hand". It looks like the Holy God, the Ruler on the throne in heaven, presents the scroll with an open hand. He offers it with the intention to reveal and activate what is written in it. It must be important.

This piques our interest, our curiosity, does it not? What is written on this mysterious scroll that makes it so important, that it gets all this attention?

As with many other details in this book, there is a great variety of ideas and opinions here. Some suggest that it contains God's covenant-promises or God's law or God's plan for the whole history of the world. Others like to identify this scroll with 'the book of life', mentioned in Rev. 3:5 and 20:12,15. Now, of course, at this moment in what is unfolding here, the scroll is still heavily sealed, so we do not know yet.

But the context can give us some idea. Remember where it is: "God's right hand". So somehow it must have to do with God's rule, God's strategy. But we can narrow this down. Remember also that the exalted Christ had said to John, *Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this*. That is in Rev. 4:1.

Well, here it is, the outline of God's judgements and whatever else will be needed to complete his victory over this rebellious world, to establish his glorious kingdom and to bring about the fulfilment of his promise of salvation, as he leads his liberated people to their final destiny, the New Jerusalem.

Yes, all this is in the scroll! But it is sealed. We do not know the details. And we cannot control the developments. It is out of our hands. We cannot fathom God's mysteries. Oh, we have heard about the final destination. But you and I, we don't know yet what it will be like on the journey to get there. We are just staring at these solid, unbreakable seals, and we feel like Daniel.

In the book of the prophet Daniel we read in chapter 12 that Daniel gets a message about the end times. But then he is told to *shut up the words and seal the book (or the scroll) until the time of the end*. And when he asks, *My Lord, what shall be the outcome of these things*, he hears, *Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end* (Daniel 12:4,8-9).

With this in the background, we feel the growing suspense with the reader (or listener) of Revelation. We have entered the final phase of history. Is this the "time of the end" Daniel was talking about? What is going to happen? The One seated on the throne, with this scroll on his right hand, what is he looking for?

Then John sees *a strong angel*, a powerful messenger from God. And he hears him call out with a loud voice. So loud, so strong that everyone in heaven, on earth and beyond could hear him. Through this angel God himself issues an urgent call: *Who is worthy, who qualifies, to open the scroll and break its seals*.

This is kind of backwards, of course. You will have to break the seals first, before you can open the scroll. But the point is here to focus our expectation first on what is most important. This scroll needs to be opened. God wants to show us what must happen, and he also wants to make it happen.

This is urgent. God had created man to rule his creation, to make his will happen on earth. But we refused. The power of sin disabled us. We are no longer capable of making God's will happen in this world. We rather did

(and do...) our own thing. And it turned into a huge mess. Then, in his grace and mercy, God wrote his plan of salvation. But the scroll can only be opened, that is, God's plan of salvation can only be activated and completed by someone who is qualified to do so. Otherwise there will be nothing left but God's eternal wrath.

And thus the holy God, who is a God of justice and mercy, is looking for someone who is "worthy". That is someone who fully identifies with you and me, a human, but who is at the same time stronger than the powers of sin and evil. We need an agent of God's amazing grace for a world lost in sin.

But the result of the search is disappointing. *No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into it.* No one stepped forward. There is no response from anywhere in the whole universe. Oh, people have their dreams and ideals. Political leaders produce rousing speeches about peace and justice. We think that one day we will be able to eradicate hatred, war, racism, violence. But it does not work. We cannot make the world a better place. We are powerless. We are stuck. We cannot create a new world-order.

As it turns out, no one seems to have the required qualifications to reveal and execute God's plan of salvation. Do you feel the tension mounting? What if the scroll remains closed? Will the whole plan be abandoned?

The silence in v.3 is dramatic, frightening, and distressful!

When he realizes this, John is deeply affected by it. *I began to weep loudly*, he says. You might wonder why. He had known Jesus, and for decades he has been preaching the gospel of salvation. That is true of course. But now he has this point of view from above and he is wondering: is it going to work or is it going to fail?

John longs for God's purpose of redemption to be realized. John longs to see the world ruled for the glory of God. And he understands that for this to happen and to be completed this scroll must be opened. If not, there will be no just judgment for the wicked and there will be no hope and no future for God's children.

John had been invited (in Rev. 4:1) to witness *what must take place after this*, but it seems like nothing is going to happen. And he cannot help but

thinking what is going to come of this world without Jesus Christ. It breaks his heart to realize that the destiny of the church and the world hangs in the balance over the question whether someone will be able to open the scroll. He weeps.

And yet, the hope is not demolished! One of the elders, one of the twenty-four we have seen in Rev. 4, comes up to John and addresses him to break the despair. *Weep no more*, he says. There is no reason to be sad and weep.

You can have this feeling sometimes that God's promises do not seem to work out, not in the world, not in your own life. "God has a plan for you and me," we say, "and it's a good plan." That sounds good, but then you experience the one disappointment after the other, and you do not see a way out. And you weep!

Do not weep, says the elder. Do not get stuck in your distress, misery, and hopelessness. Open your eyes and look around for someone who has thus far escaped your attention. Look and see the one who qualifies, because he has triumphed and has defeated the evil powers of sin and death.

And then he explains what John is supposed to see: *The Lion of the tribe of Judah*, who is also *the Root of David*. These are two titles that refer to Old Testament promises of the Messiah, the promised Saviour Jesus Christ.

The first one alludes to the patriarch Jacob's prophecy about the ruler who will come from Judah and who will be like a powerful Lion, triumphant and full of strength (Genesis 49:8-10).

The other one alludes to the Son of David, who is at the same time the victorious Son of God and thus also the origin, the root of David's kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12-13; Psalm 110:1; Matthew 1:1; Revelation 22:16).

The point is that both titles suggest a militant conquest, a powerful victory that qualifies Christ to open this mysterious scroll and its seals, take control of God's plan of salvation, and bring it all to a glorious completion.

A POWERFUL LAMB

But then, what John is seeing when he looks up is confusing for him, and definitely for the reader's (or listener's) expectations. He expected to see a Lion, a fierce and mighty warrior. But he does not. He sees a Lamb. That is the opposite. Here is nothing fierce and powerful. A Lamb is weak and vulnerable.

This alternation between “hearing” and “seeing” turns out to be an important element to understand Revelation. Several times John ‘hears’ and ‘sees’ things that are connected, but different. And then the one interprets the other one.

For now, just one example. In Rev. 7:4 John hears the number 144,000, but according to v.9 he sees a great multitude. What he hears explains the spiritual reality of what he is seeing.

Now look at Rev. 5 again. John hears: it's a Lion. And that promises a powerful and triumphant victory. But then he sees a Lamb. And that explains that Christ won this victory, not with military force, like the powers of this world, but with a power that shows his love and grace; his willingness to become weak and vulnerable, to give himself in his suffering and death on the cross for the sake of God's children.

This is emphasized by two remarkable details. The Lamb John is seeing *looks as though it had been slain*. “Like a Lamb our Saviour was led to the slaughter”, says the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 53). And in Israel the Passover Lamb shed its blood to save God's people from slavery and death (Exodus 12). This Lamb is ‘slain’, slaughtered. Christ should be dead. However, *this Lamb is standing*. It is alive. Christ arose from the dead.

Look at this unique and powerful picture: “a slain lamb that is standing.” And recognize its glory as the result of its sacrifice.

This Lamb, who is at the same time the Lion, is a powerful Lamb. He is our victorious Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ. In his suffering, death, and resurrection he shows characteristics of both. He is majestic and vulnerable. He is strong and helpless.

Here is the mystery, the paradox of our Christian faith, as we read about it in 1 Corinthians 1: God achieved his triumphant victory, he set us free from Satan's power, not by military might and violence, but through the weakness and foolishness of the gospel of the cross. The power of Jesus Christ is the power of self-sacrificing love. For worldly thinking this way of salvation is either offensive or ludicrous. But do not be intimidated by that, says Paul. *To those who are being saved the message of the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God* (1 Corinthians 1:18, 24).

This also sets the pattern for you and me as God's children. We are to fight our spiritual battles, not with physical power or with political strength, but with purity of faith and with enduring love for God, with faithful dedication to Jesus Christ – even to the point of death, if needed. 'Martyrdom' looks like a defeat. But it is not! It is a victory that makes you share in the final victory of the powerful Lamb of God.

John can see how powerful this Lamb is. First of all, it stands in the centre of the throne. As it is surrounded by the same heavenly throne-attendants we have seen in Rev. 4, it shares in the power of the Lord God Almighty.

Then he also sees that it has seven horns and seven eyes. The 'horn' is an image of power, and again the number seven stresses how complete and perfect his power is. As Jesus said to his disciples just before he ascended into heaven, *all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me* (Matthew 28:18).

And with the seven eyes as the seven-fold Spirit, he is also filled with this Spirit of God who fills all the earth with the gospel of salvation.

All this allows the Lamb with the power of the Lion to come and take the scroll. Everything had to wait for the cross, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ, our Mediator. Now he was given the authority to complete the history of our world according to God's plan. Now the seals can be broken by the only One worthy to bring God's justice and righteousness, God's grace and mercy to a glorious end, when from everywhere God's people come home to the New Jerusalem.

Now the throne of God the Father becomes also the throne of the Lamb. Here is our comfort as we continue to read Revelation, whatever will be going on.

The effect of this dramatic moment is breathtaking. Already before the Lamb has done anything, just because he takes the scroll, there is in heaven a great outburst of exuberant joy. *The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders* – the circles closest to the throne of God, as we have seen before – they all *fall down before the Lamb*, united in humble adoration, praise, and worship.

In Rev. 4 they never stopped worshipping God Almighty: holy, holy, holy...!

And now they also worship the Lamb as the only One worthy to open the scroll and break the deadlock. They had harps, in Revelation always associated with songs of deliverance. And they had golden bowls full of incense, lifting up the prayers of the church on earth in perfect unison with the heavenly worship to the glory of God and the Lamb.

UNIVERSAL WORSHIP

What John then hears conveys the deep meaning of what he sees. He hears *a new song*. Indeed, the worship-song of the elders and the living creatures is a new song. For the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb have done new, wonderful things. Something unique, something new has happened. Never before has there been such a great and glorious deliverance.

It is a heart-warming song of freedom and redemption, a soul-stirring song of salvation from Satan, sin, and death. The Lamb of God has died and is alive. The triumphant Lion of the tribe of Judah ushers in a new age.

Here is the glorious answer to the urgent question in v.2: “Who is worthy?”

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals. You qualify because you were slain. The self-sacrificing love of the Lamb in his suffering, death, and resurrection, is the basis for his victory and redemption.

And what is the result? “With the price of your blood you purchased people, to set them free from Satan’s power and present them to God the Father as his children.” No, Jesus Christ did not purchase every individual person

in the whole world. But the scope of his salvation is universal, world-wide. They come *from every tribe, language, people and nation*. They represent every ethnic and linguistic group, every political and social category everywhere.

Whoever you are, wherever you come from, it does not matter. Believe that with his blood Jesus Christ bought you. You belong to him and to God the Father. He alone set you free from the deadly powers of sin and evil.

Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, breaks through all our boundaries and unites people from everywhere and every background into one people of God, the holy church of all times and places, the full population of the new earth, the magnificent fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham: *all families of the earth shall be blessed in you* (Gen. 12:3).

You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth, united and fully dedicated to serve the Almighty Ruler of the universe in his glorious kingdom.

But then the circle of praise widens. The concentric circles that surround the circle of the twenty-four elders expand dramatically to include angels. *Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels*, says John. "Many" is an understatement. The numbers are just staggering. When he says, *myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands*, he just means it was an enormous, huge mass, beyond counting! It was astounding: angels, angels, angels and more angels, as far as the eye can see.

They all sang, and in a loud voice. They sang the glory of the slain Lamb. That must have been incredibly overwhelming to listen to. They follow what is happening and they burst out in abundant praise, antiphonal harmony with the song in v.9 and 10.

In the song of the angels we hear seven attributes the Lamb is worthy to receive (v.12). The perfect and complete fullness of all virtues in the universe belong to him. It does not get any better and more magnificent than this in the heavenly worship service.

And yet, it is not enough. A still wider circle is needed to give full praise to the significance of the work of Christ. Finally, all of God's creation joins in universal worship. Every creature everywhere is participating, it says in v.13.

The circle becomes so enormous that John can no longer see them. He only hears all the voices, praising the Holy God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Here is the grand finale, the perfect harmony of all voices, in the very climax of everything we have seen and heard in the diptych of Rev. 4 and 5. The marvellous fulfilment of Psalm 150 – *Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.*

In most exuberant songs of praise and glory all the universe worships the Almighty God and Jesus Christ his Son for their powerful work in creation and redemption.

And with the constant refrain of the four living creatures in a resounding 'Amen' as a permanent, never-ending approval of this grandiose doxology the universal worship comes full circle from where it began in Rev. 4:9.

Oh, it is true: at this point in the plot of Revelation the world is still in rebellion. God's judgments are coming. But here is a glimpse of how it was intended to be and how it will be again in the future.

Rejoice! Ultimately all things will come to glorify him who sits on the throne and the Lamb for ever and ever.

church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and who you should deal with these.

2. What does it mean to be *lukewarm*? And how can we help each other to avoid a lukewarm attitude toward God, toward the church and toward each other?
3. What is the wrong thinking behind the use of Revelation 3:20 to stimulate evangelism activities in the church?
4. In all these seven letters we hear close to the end or right at the end the words *he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. What is the intention of this phrase, which is apparently important enough to stress this to all the churches?

Chapter 10 – Revelation 4

1. At the end of all seven letters the glorified Christ promises various blessings to *the one who conquers*. What does he mean by that? And what or who are we to conquer? And how are we supposed to do this?
2. John's vision in Revelation 4 is pretty amazing. What does it mean for us and how should it impact us that God is supremely holy? How should the worship in heaven we read about, impact the manner in which we worship this holy God?
3. When the 24 elders represent the church in God's presence (verse 4), what does that tell us about the place and the role of the church in the last days (the time between Jesus' 1st and 2nd coming)? Does the fact that the church is represented by 'elders' teach us anything about the office of 'elder' in the church today?
4. Read Isaiah 6:1-3 and Ezekiel 1:4-28 and compare those descriptions with the description of the four living creatures in Revelation 4:6-8.

Chapter 11 – Revelation 5

1. How do we come to know God in Revelation 4 and 5? And what does 'worship' mean in the light of this chapter?
2. We read here about abundant worship: the 4 creatures, the 24 elders, myriads of angels, and joined by all God's earthly creatures. Is

there a connection, and if so, what kind of connection between this universal choir and how we worship God and sing to the praise of his glory?

3. The content of the scroll in Revelation 5 is an outline of God's judgment and salvation as these unfold in the last days, the time between Jesus' 1st and 2nd coming. In the visions of the rest of the book Christ is opening the seals one by one, and every time new things are happening. Can we look at current events in the world today and determine at which one of the seals (or trumpets or bowls) we are right now? Why or why not?
4. Why can we say that Revelation 5 is the key to understanding the whole book?

Chapter 12 – Revelation 6

1. What is the best way to explain the things we (and all people throughout the world) experience in light of what we read about the impact of the four horsemen and their activities in the verses 2 – 8? And what is the double purpose of those activities?
2. When the apostle John is given these visions he is *in the Spirit* and he can see and hear things he could not have seen and heard normally, with his physical eyes and ears. Does that mean that what he sees and hears is not real? Is there a difference – and if so, what would be the difference – between a dream and a vision?
3. People have different ideas as to what heaven looks like and how they imagine the souls of believers live on together with Christ in heaven. How does what we read in verses 10 and 11 help you to form an idea about this?
4. Verse 12 mentions a *great earthquake*. Where else in Scripture do you find references to great earthquakes as manifestation of God acting as Judge?

Chapter 13 – Revelation 7:1 – 8:5

1. Read Ezekiel 9. What would be the connection between this chapter and what we read in Revelation 7 about *sealing the servants of God on their foreheads*?