

SEQUOYAH HILLS  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“Seals: The Lion and the Lamb”**

**Dr. Jay Howell**

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*Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a mighty 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 bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”*

*Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song:*

*“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.”*

*Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”*

*Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”*

*And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.*

*Revelation 5:1-14*

Last week you'll remember we started this series in the Book of Revelation. We're not doing the entire book, just one particular section of it, and this section centers around these seven seals, which will come into the picture today. We started in chapter four, in which this John of Patmos, as he's known, is given a vision, a glimpse into what I think could be described as a scene of heavenly worship, and that scene continues as we go into chapter five. Let's go to God's Word.

[Read passage.]

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I don't know what it says about society today that a new pastime that had gotten a bit popular, at least before the pandemic, involves paying to be locked into a room with a few others, and then made to feel bad about yourself when you can't get out. I'm talking of course about Escape Rooms.

Some of you may have done one of these before, but if you're not familiar, premise of an Escape Room is you're locked in a room with a group. In order to get out, you have to solve a series of puzzles, usually within an hour, and the last puzzle will somehow unlock the door to leave the room itself. And most of them have themes to them, like a haunted museum or a secret tomb or something like that. But the point is to get out.

The whole time, though, you're being watched by the staff there, by video camera—they're not actually in the room with you. Now they say they're watching just to make sure you're not breaking stuff, or to give you hints, but I think they're just laughing at all the weird things that these groups end up doing and saying with each other trying to get out of the room.

Because let's just say you learn a lot about a group of people when you're locked in a room with a ticking clock and a series of tests and puzzles you have to solve in order to get out. If you've done one of these, maybe you've been lucky to do one with a group of new friends or colleagues, and I say "new" friends because it's around new people that you know folks will be on their best behavior. But if you've done one of these with close, lifelong friends or even...family, then you might've seen some fireworks in that room.

I've done these rooms maybe 3-4 times and it was the one with family, a couple of cousins and sister and brother-in-law. A lot of cooks in the kitchen would be the short way to describe it. But we got out, and I guess that was the point. But the whole time, the whole thing feels like, and really it is, a test to see if your group is smart enough, clever enough, intuitive enough, and even within your group who is smarter, more clever, more intuitive, to solve the puzzles to get you out of the room. And when you step out of the room with time still on the clock, there's a vindication. No, this artificially stressful environment couldn't trick us. We've now won this experience that we've all paid money for.

But then there was another time when I was in a group that *didn't* make it out in time. And the shame, friends, the shame, of walking out of that room, with the ticking clock sitting at zero, with the staff having to open the door from the outside to let you out, the shame. If this has ever happened to you, you know what I'm talking about. It's as if the entire apparatus is saying, you weren't smart enough; you weren't clever enough; you weren't intuitive enough. You aren't worthy.

"Worthy" is one of those words that feels like it comes out of a medieval myth or something, like is this knight worthy to seek this yon Holy Grail, but not to be worthy is a pretty crushing thing. It's saying, not deserving, not qualifying, as if you were measured, weighed, and found wanting.

What we encounter here in this fifth chapter of Revelation is something that, if you asked me, might be found in one of those escape rooms: a scroll with seven seals in it, and the central question is who is worthy to open it. This fifth chapter continues the vision we saw from chapter four, in which John saw this heavenly throne room and one seated on that throne. But now John sees that the one seated on the throne is holding something: this scroll with seven seals on it. And obviously this scroll needs to be opened. But to open it, there's not a need for smarts or cleverness. It's not a puzzle to be solved. Instead, it's worthiness. Who would be worthy enough to do it? Who would be up to the task?

As John tells us in this vision, it seems that no one, no one in heaven or on earth was worthy to open up this scroll. And it causes him to weep. Why? What's so special about this scroll that not opening it up would cause this man to weep? I mean those escape rooms can be stressful but hopefully it's not bringing people to tears, right? A bit stranger still to weep at this scroll remaining unopened if you happen to peek ahead at just what happens when these seals are broken. With each one it seems something horrible happens, more on that next week, but it might make you wonder, wait, if all *that* is going to happen, then by all means leave that thing sealed up! What's so special about this scroll?

Scrolls were common enough in the ancient Roman world, as were seals that were put on them, but apparently there was only one kind of scroll that commonly had seven seals on it: a last will and testament. One's final wishes for a citizen's estate, to be executed by a family member or trusted loved one. And each of the seven seals would have been the seal of one representative, so in order to open it, the person for each seal would have to be present in order to legally do so.

So what would it mean for John to see in the hands of the Almighty, the one seated on the throne, a scroll that, to his eyes at least, might have looked like a last will and testament? The will of God is a phrase that comes to mind, the final purpose, the final plan for creation, for everything. And when no one is found worthy, deserving, up to the task, to open it, it makes him weep. Why?

Have you ever read a book or seen a movie that does the thing at the very end when the main character, after everything has happened, wakes up in bed, revealing that the whole thing, the whole story, had just been a dream? Kind of undermines the whole thing. Makes you wonder whether it was worth it at all to read or watch it. That's kind of what I think is going on when John starts weeping when he saw that there was no one worthy to open this scroll, the last will and testament, God's final plan and purpose for creation. It meant, at least in the terms of this vision, that there wouldn't be a purpose to any of this, because what would be more devastating, recognizing that hard things happen, or realizing that none of it actually means anything? I think that's why he weeps.

Then one of the elders, one of the twenty-four elders gathered around the throne, turns to him and say in v. 5, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." Now there's hope. Now there's one who could open the scroll, one who could reveal the will of God, who would show and execute God's plan that would make sense of all of this mess, and it's this Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.

Then John looks around, you'd expect looking around for a glimpse of this hero, this conqueror, this Lion, and he sees in the middle of everybody and everything gathered around the throne, not a Lion, like he was supposed to be, but of all things, a "Lamb, standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes." This had to have thrown John for a loop, because who when looking for a Lion, this mighty, powerful beast, king of the jungle and all that, gets excited when you see a Lamb, and not just a Lamb, but one that's been killed. Especially true when you're on the lookout for one who would be strong enough, powerful enough, worthy enough to open up this scroll, this final will of God. What you see doesn't match what you've been told. Seeing a Lamb, a slain Lamb at that, doesn't quite match up to the Lion you were told to expect, because honestly, how many of us quake in our boots at the sight of a Lamb?

But then an amazing thing happens. This Lamb, this harmless Lamb, goes to the throne and takes the scroll, and then everybody goes wild. All those around the throne, everyone we had seen last week, the four living creatures covered in eyeballs, the twenty-four elders, everyone that had been worshiping the one on the throne now was worshiping this slain Lamb, saying in v. 9, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation." Remember, he hasn't even done anything yet. He just picked up the scroll, and the crowd goes wild. What's that about?

I remember this concert back when I was growing up a friend of mine told me about. Jimmy Page and Robert Plant, who are two founding members of the band Led Zeppelin, were touring together. And they were playing some new songs they had written along with some Led Zeppelin classics, but the one that everyone was really curious if they'd play was of course their most famous song, "Stairway to Heaven," which had been Led Zeppelin's closing song for years, which the two of them hadn't played together for years. So at one point, Jimmy Page the guitarist actually goes and picks up a guitar and plays just the opening notes of "Stairway to Heaven," and everyone recognizes it and goes wild. But then he shrugs and says, "Nah," and puts the guitar back down.

That's almost like what's going on here, it seems. The Lamb hasn't done anything yet; he just picks up the scroll, but the fact that he picks it up was like Jimmy Page playing those opening notes of "Stairway to

Heaven.” It was cause enough to put everyone into this ecstatic worship. And the focus of their worship, just in case we didn’t get the point, was emphasizing that this slain Lamb, this harmless little animal, was in fact the one that they had been waiting for, the Lion of Judah, the one who has conquered, the one who would open the scroll. But the part that no one seems to bat an eye about is that fact that this conquering Lion didn’t look like a Lion at all. It’s this harmless, slain Lamb, and this was the one they all worshiped as worthy.

It’s like you go to a boxing match, and they’re doing the big introductions. The announcer gets up and really hypes up who’s coming in. “And in this corner, from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the conqueror, the champion, the Lion of Judah,” and everyone goes wild, the spotlight goes over to his entrance, and you expect some big, brawny boxer, but instead walks out this scrawny weakling who looks like he had just himself gotten out of a bad fight because he was all beaten up and bleeding. But he steps into the ring, and the crowd goes wild, because they know that this is the champ.

It doesn’t quite make sense: this slaughtered Lamb being the conquering Lion, but that’s the image that John puts forward for us, as part of this glimpse of heaven and this vision of the final will of God for creation. The one who would bring it about, who was worthy to open it, was this slaughtered Lamb.

And in the same way that last week’s vision of heavenly worship should remind us that everything we read in this mysterious frightening book is pointing toward a point of praise, I think this vision of the Lion and the Lamb is supposed to frame how we read what comes next. Because in short order, the Lamb will start opening these seals and this scroll, and some terrible things will happen as a result, but it’s as if we’re being reminded that the one who is opening up this scroll, is in fact the one who himself has been slain.

It may not come as a surprise but in case there was any doubt, though he isn’t named directly, this Lamb, this slaughtered Lamb is Christ. And this vision is reminding us that even in a time like what might seem to be the cataclysmic revealing of the final will of God, power and might and strength and worthiness are redefined. We think, the world is ending! We need someone strong and mighty! And to that Christ says, yes you do, but let me show you what strength and might really look like. How easy is it for us to confuse it? How often are we tempted when faced with trials and tribulations to seek out the so-called strong man, the one who projects the strong front with bravado? It’s an easy thing to do. Might make us feel secure. Might make us say, “Well, they’ll protect us. They’ll get us through this.” It’s the way of the world, honestly.

But what John tells us in this vision is that true strength, true power, true might, what really makes this Lion worthy is not because of his mighty roar or powerful claws, but because he is a Lamb who was slain. Might change how we engage with the world too, especially when times get tough. How easy is it for us to think, well, if I just pick this problem up and by sheer force of will and ability, I will solve this, it’ll be alright? I just need to show that I’m strong, I’m powerful, I’m worthy. Easy for me to think that. But what if instead of trying to showcase our strength we instead sought to give ourselves up, to lay ourselves down in love and sacrifice? What would your relationships be like? What would your workplaces be like? What would our church be like?

For if John is showing us anything in this vision of the Lion and the Lamb, it’s that whenever we hear the call for the conquering Lion of Judah, what we should look for is the harmless, slaughtered Lamb, and against all expectations, this is the one who is worthy.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.