

Revelation 4–5

The Lamb who roared

Main Point

Jesus has authority over creation and history, because he was slain and purchased a people for himself.

Application

Submit to Jesus's authority and identify as one of his people. Be comforted in distress, because he is in control. Worship him (*i.e.* act rightly in accordance with who he is) as a member of his kingdom and his priest.

Purpose

1. To show one of the NT's most awesome (though neglected) images of Jesus.
2. To encourage us to see ourselves as belonging to Jesus first, and anything else in a secondary light.

Introduction: A matter of identity

Suzanne and I are in the midst of a transition period at the moment. At the end of this year, God willing, I will finish my Bible college studies, and so I will have to do something else.

Meanwhile, Suzanne is doing a TAFE course and considering a career change.

The plans we had made to go to France seem to have evaporated, so now everything from web designer to puppy trainer to international man of mystery presents itself as a possibility.

One of the things I love about transition periods is that they give you a chance to think everything through again. They give you a chance to reinvent yourself.

When you leave school, you realize that in the real world, all values are inverted: nerds rule and jocks are losers, so you reinvent yourself accordingly.

Then you find a job, or, if you want to delay adulthood a bit longer, you go to uni. Endless opportunities to reinvent yourself.

And so you get to ask the question, "Who am I?"

When we ask the question, "Who am I?", we start to realize that there are all kinds of ways that we can answer it. Will I give an autobiography, a CV? Does my identity come from my achievements?

[PAUSE]

Or, perhaps, in light of the relative success in the World Cup, not to mention at Suncorp last night, I might be proud to think of myself as an Australian. But what will that mean? With what kind of Australia do I identify? With the strong Anglo-Celtic, rural ideal of John Howard's boyhood?

Or do I identify with our contemporary multi-racial, strangely xenophobic, urban reality?

I might say, "I'm a man," but what will that mean? Once upon a time, I'm told, men were strong, silent types who provided for their families. Now I'm encouraged to be interested in fashion and skincare, and it doesn't bother me at all that my wife earns more than I do.

But for many of us here, when we ask the question, "Who am I?", part of the answer must be, "I am Christian, I'm a follower of Jesus."

As we look at our passage in Revelation today, it is my hope that the question, "Who am I?" should be resoundingly answered for us, as we delve deeply into the question, "Who is Jesus? Who is this one I say I follow?"

Will you pray with me as we begin?

Father God, we thank you for your word to us. Thankyou that you care so much for us, and let us know how we can love you in return. We ask that today, as we think about who we are in relation to you, we might be filled with your Spirit so that we can love you better. Amen.

1 God's revelation to John

Before we dive into chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, we'll need to spend a couple of minutes orientating ourselves to the book as a whole.

Revelation's a curious book, and it attracts plenty of attention from crackpot sects and hare-brained writers like Salem Kirban, who wrote this book, *20 Reasons Why This Present Earth May Not Last Another 20 Years*.

Kirban's book, published now 33 years ago, interprets news stories from around the globe in light of a literalist reading of Revelation.

If you just take the time to look, he'll answer such questions for you as...

But Revelation also provides us with some of the NT's most majestic images of Jesus, of who he is and what he has done.

To get a handle on Revelation in such a way as to avoid wild interpretations, we'll need to take into account of a few things.

a apocalyptic literature

Firstly, Revelation is apocalyptic literature. It's a genre that pops up in various OT prophets, and was relatively common in Israel in the 200 or so years before Jesus.

Apocalyptic literature is coded. It uses symbols to communicate the truth. Some common symbols in Revelation are the numbers 7 and 12, both of which mean 'complete', or 'whole'. Likewise, a horn symbolizes power; eyes symbolize knowledge, and so on.

Now, we're going to look at an apocalyptic vision tonight, but my fear is that I'll kill it. It's like dissecting a frog, or a joke, or a Shakespearian soliloquy. On one level, you need to dissect it to understand it properly, but as soon as you do, you pretty much kill it. You tend to miss the overall majesty of it.

So I trust that you'll go away and read this passage again later, and be struck by the awesome vision of Jesus we have been given.

b past, present, and future events, *i.e.* the gospel

Now the word 'apocalyptic' just means 'revealed' — hence 'Revelation'. In the case of the Book of Revelation, God is revealing to the Apostle John past, present, and future events.

It's worth saying it again, because I think often people imagine Revelation is all about the future. But it's not: what is revealed to John involves the past, the present, and the future.

Because ultimately, the Book of Revelation is about the same thing the rest of the NT is about. It's the revelation of the gospel about Jesus Christ. In particular, Revelation describes the authority of Jesus. He is the king — the one who died, and who was raised to life — the past. He now controls the world — the present. And he will return to judge the world and to bring in a new creation — future.

c pastoral focus

But all those things about Jesus aren't said in some kind of ivory tower. It's not theology for theology's sake.

Because Revelation is above all a pastoral book. It's written to seven churches, who are facing **some** difficulties that are peculiar to them in time and place, and some that have plagued the church throughout the ages.

I've listed what I think are the main pastoral concerns in dot points on your outlines there.

- **Cæsar worship and Jewish hostility**

One challenge that the original recipients face that we don't have to anything like the same extent is persecution. They faced a certain amount of persecution from the secular authorities of the Roman Empire,

who required that people worship the Cæsar, the emperor. They also faced persecution from some Jewish groups.

We know that at this time Christianity was beginning to look less like a sect of Judaism and more like a religion in its own right. There is growing animosity on both sides, and you can see some evidence of that in the book.

- **false teaching, sexual immorality, materialism and apathy**

The rest of the bullet points there show problems that are all-too common today. Like the early church, we know how seductive and how destructive false teaching can be.

Our society, like theirs, is sexually promiscuous, and we know how Christians can be led astray sexually.

And far more today than could ever have been said in the first century, we are deceived by wealth. We are comfortable, and we think we have all that we need.

Inevitably, therefore, we can be apathetic about Jesus. In the language of Revelation 3, we can be lukewarm towards him. We're not cold — we're not opposed to him — but we're not hot — we don't yearn to see him glorified.

So how does God answer these pastoral challenges facing the seven churches in Asia? It's an intriguing solution. God gives John a vision of Jesus.

2 Setting the scene: the throne room of God 4:2–11

And so we read in Revelation 4,

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.

A door to the heavenly reality has been opened. John is invited to see things from God's perspective.

a the Almighty vv 2–6

And, verse 2,

2 At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

The scene is set for God's revelation to John — point 2 on your outlines. John has been ushered into the very throne room of God.

I don't know if you've thought about this before, but it's worth pointing out that the universe is not democratic.

John doesn't enter the heavenly reality and see a parliament, or a bunch of people SMSing their preferences.

There is a throne. It is the seat of absolute authority.

And the one seated on the throne, verse 3, had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.

I find it fascinating that from John's description, you have absolutely no idea what God looks like, except it's precious minerals, it's majestic.

And you get a sense of the awesome power of God in verse 5:

5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.

It's an image that recalls Mount Sinai, where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law. When God descended on the mountain, there was thunder and lightning, and the people of Israel were terrified.

This is not a God to be trifled with.

What's more, verse 6:

6 Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

Throughout the OT, the sea has been an image of chaos, of immense, dark power. The sea cannot be tamed. It's the place [PPT] where Leviathan, the great sea-monster, dwells. The sea is a symbol of everything that is opposed to God. [PPT — BLANK]

And yet, in the heavenly throne room, the sea is still. It's perfectly flat, like a sheet of glass.

God has tamed the chaos. Nothing resists his authority.

b his redeemed people v 4

Although God alone has authority, he is not alone in his throne room. Verse 4:

4 Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.

Now, remember I said that 12 is a number that symbolizes completeness? 24 is two times 12, and most commentators think that this is an image of the complete people of God.

12 tribes of Israel under the old covenant; 12 apostles in the new covenant (*cf.* Mk 10:37f) — 24 elders — it's a symbol of the whole people of God, gathered around the throne of God, casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea.

c all creation vv 6–8

But it's not just humans who are represented here. Verse 6 again:

6 Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the centre, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and behind.

7 The first living creature was like a lion [the noblest creature], the second was like an ox [the strongest creature], the third had a face like a human being [the cleverest creature], the fourth was like a flying eagle [the swiftest creature].

All of creation is represented here.

And the four living creatures are covered with eyes. They see everything. They know everything. And so what do they do with this great knowledge?

d worship because of creation vv 9–11

Verse 8:

Day and night they never stop saying:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever,

10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

11 You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

In the throne room of the Almighty, all creation sings God's praises. Day and night, God is proclaimed to be holy, and to be everlasting. There is none like him.

Did you notice why in particular God is worshipped here? Look again at verse 11:

11 You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for — because — you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

God is worshipped because he is the creator. He has made everything, and he sustains everything.

I think often we tend to miss the impact of that. We take the world for granted, and imagine it is self-existent and self-sustaining.

We tend to think, too, that our possessions are our own, that our lives are our own. They're not. They are God's, for he made us. He owns us. And he demands our allegiance.

Perhaps you've come here tonight and you know that, practically speaking, **you** are your own god. You know you run your life as if it's your own, and you only have to answer to yourself.

If that's you, you need to appreciate the majesty of the God in John's vision. He's in control of everything. He created everything. He created *you*. And the right response, as we see from the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures, is to worship him.

It's to acknowledge that he is God. It's to live rightly as one of his creatures.

If you want to know more about that, please do speak to me; speak to Anna, speak to another Christian here whom you trust, because God deals very severely with those who do not acknowledge him as the creator. Of all the books in the Bible, Revelation has some of the clearest and most horrific imagery of God's dealings with his enemies (*e.g.* Rev 14:20; 19:15).

3 Complication: who can open the scroll? 5:1–4

But John's vision isn't complete. In this throne room where God has complete authority, there's a complication.

Read again with me from chapter 5, verse 1:

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.

2 And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?

3 But no-one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.

4 I wept and wept because no-one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.

God has a scroll that's all sealed up. As we read on in chapter 6 and following, we realize it's a scroll that reveals God's plans and purposes for the world. It's the scroll that unleashes the Messiah's judgment on the world.

But no one anywhere in creation can open it. Who can bring about God's purposes? The elders on their thrones — the people of God — cannot. Nothing in creation can open this scroll.

The Apostle John weeps in frustration.

4 Resolution: the Lion and the Lamb 5:5–14

But, verse 5,

5 Then one of the elders said to me, Do not weep! 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.

a I heard "a Lion of the tribe of Judah" v 5

There *is* someone who can open the scroll! It's the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

Now, in Biblical history, [PPT] Abraham had a son, Isaac. Isaac had a son, Jacob. Jacob changed his name to Israel.

And Israel had twelve sons, who became twelve tribes.

One of those sons was Judah. And it was Judah's descendants who were the kings (Gen 49:8–10).

The first great king from Judah was David, of Goliath-slaying fame (*cf.* Isa 11).

So the one who is able to open the scroll is a descendant of Judah and David. He's a great king. And, says the elder, he has triumphed.

There is a great king who has won a great victory. He's a lion. He probably sounds like James Earl Jones or at least Liam Neeson. He's an impressive figure.

b I saw "a Lamb..." vv 6–7

So John turns to behold this great conquering leonine king, verse 6:

6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.

- **looking as if it had been slain**

I saw...a Lamb? And it's a lamb that's been slaughtered. I imagine its voice probably sounds more like Woody Allen.

It's a strange symbol, isn't it? I don't know if you've thought about it before, but what are the kinds of animals people usually choose for their emblems? What animal symbol does Russia have? England? France? United States? India? Australia?

Of course, you can find counter-examples, but generally it holds, doesn't it? As humans, we tend to choose as our emblems powerful, ravenous, rapacious animals.

And yet, at the centre of the throne room of God, the one with authority over the destiny of the world, is a lamb, looking as if it had been slain.

Together with the cross, this is a symbol of weakness, of humility, of death.

God's authority does not see him lord it over people to his selfish advantage. God's power is paradoxically displayed in weakness.

And the church has made terrible errors when it has lost sight of the *nature* of God's power and authority. Whether you think of the crusades, or the extortionate power of the medieval Roman church, or in Sydney today, there's the triumphalism of prosperity doctrine or the haughty self-righteousness that can seep into evangelicalism: Christianity is always perverted when we proudly display our lion, and lose sight of the lamb.

- **with seven horns and seven eyes**

But this is a paradoxical lamb. Verse 6 again:

He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

Now, as soon as you try to picture this, you end up with something pretty strange [PPT], as I discovered when I put 'Revelation lamb' into Google images. But you get the symbolism. The horn is the image of power, and this lamb has seven horns — he has complete power.

And we're told that he has authority even to send the Spirit of God (*cf.* John 16:7).

[PPT — BLANK]

▪ **who took the scroll**

And he has authority to open the scroll that will reveal God's plans and purposes, the scroll that will unleash the Messiah's judgment on his enemies. Verse 7,

7 He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.

8 And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Comforting, isn't it, that those prayers that sometimes seem so fruitless are given such honour and care in God's presence?

9 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.

10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.

11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.

12 In a loud voice they sang:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!

13 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 honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!

14 The four living creatures said, Amen, and the elders fell down and worshipped.

c worship because of redemption vv 8–14

It's an awesome image, isn't it? Even as in chapter 4 we saw the redeemed people of God and all creation singing the praises of the creator, here in chapter 5 we see the twenty-four elders and every creature on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and myriad myriad angel voices sing the praises of...well, sing whose praises?

Verse 12: In a loud voice they sang, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!"

And again, verse 13:

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!

No longer is it just Yahweh, God Almighty, who is worshipped, but it is the Lamb as well.

In the very throne room of God, all creation worships the Lamb.

As I see it, the NT has no clearer statement that Jesus is God. For it is blasphemy to worship anyone but God (Matt 4:10; *cf.* Rev 19:10; 22:8–9). Certainly God would not tolerate such a thing in his own throne room, where even the sea is pacified.

I was so struck by this as I was preparing this talk that I thought I should speak to someone who *didn't* think Jesus was God to see how they understood this passage.

So I rang the headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and asked if I could speak to someone about Revelation 5. I can tell you later how it went, if you're interested.

But this is such an extraordinary song. All of creation sings in verse 13,

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!

Praise, honour, glory, power, for ever and ever.

There are many manifestations of human power. And it's generally recognized that the more power you give someone, the more corrupt they become. That's what's great about democracy: it's a way of ensuring no one has the power to *do* anything. That's what prompted Winston Churchill to say that "democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

Of course, in late Western democracies, we limit not only the extent of people's power, but also its duration. In the US, you can only be President for two terms. In Australia, you can only be Prime Minister until there's a recession, or until your Treasurer ousts you.

However powerful you are, however, the good news is that humans are mortal, so there is a limit on the time they can corruptly wield power.

Now, I cannot imagine us saying that we want praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever to go to John Howard. Nor could we say we wanted praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever to go to Kim Beasley, or Kevin Rudd, or even Peter Garrett.

But I do want praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever to go to him who sits on the throne, and to the lamb.

Because the authority of the lamb is not self-serving. He does not wield power corruptly.

Rather, verse 9,

9 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.

10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.

All creation worships the lamb **because** he was slain. And he died purposefully, to purchase a people for himself.

Under the old covenant, God rescued Israel from Egypt by the blood of a sacrificial lamb, and he said to them, [PPT] 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you [Israel] will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you [Israel] shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod 19:4–6).

Now, God has brought his people out of slavery to sin and death by the blood of his Son. Now, his people come not just from Israel, but from **every** tribe, language and nation. People from China, from India, from Slovenia, from France, from Arnhem Land — all must now recognize Jesus as king. Now we are a kingdom and priests to serve our God.

These are mighty truths, more than worthy of a new song.

[PAUSE]

Now, I have some comments I want to make in conclusion, and some pointers in how to apply this passage, but I thought I should ask if there are any questions or comments at this stage about what I've said this evening.

5 Worshipping the Lamb

I take it that if we have properly understood this vision, if we have properly understood that Jesus, slain lamb and conquering Messiah, is at the control desk of history, then we will want to worship him.

In the heavenly reality, that's what all creation is doing. So it makes sense that we should be doing it in the earthly reality as well.

Now, new covenant worship is never merely words. Rather, to worship God is to respond appropriately to who God is and what he's done. It will involve action. I'm going to give us time to think and talk about that on our tables in a moment, but as we do so, I think we should bear in mind three things — the three things listed under point 5 on your outlines, there.

a purchased

Firstly, purchased. If you are a Christian, then Christ has purchased your life by his blood. We saw in chapter 4 that we all owe our lives to God anyway, because he is the creator.

Now, we have a double reason to give our lives to him, because Jesus gave his life for us.

I think this should be of tremendous comfort to us, too, as we go through times of trouble. God cares for us. The lamb has laid down his life for us, and that same lamb is now in control of everything.

b kingdom

Because Jesus is the king of God's kingdom. We are members of God's kingdom, which means we need to live with Jesus as king.

And it's here, I think, that sometimes we have trouble making the idea concrete. To begin with, it may help us to reflect on the pastoral concerns of the Book of Revelation that we saw earlier — sexual immorality, greed, and so on. But we need to apply Jesus's kingship to all areas of our life.

Shortly after I became Christian, someone suggested to me that a good way to avoid being materialistic was to give money away. He suggested I set up a separate bank account for giving.

So I took the advice, and now a percentage of any money we receive goes into that bank account. We then direct debit all our giving from that account.

A little bit more goes into the account each month than comes out, and so if there's a Christian with a particular need — like buying a car, or attending a conference, or whatever, then we can give towards that.

It's one concrete way in our lives that we've sought to live with Jesus as king.

I began tonight talking about transition moments in life, where you're forced to make decisions about where your life is headed. Again, early in my Christian walk, someone suggested to me that often when people make decisions, they start with the question of where they're going to work, then they think where they're going to live, and then once they've moved they start looking for a church.

But this man counselled me to flip things around the other way. Ask firstly, 'How and where can I best serve the kingdom of God?' Then ask, 'What kind of house would best serve those purposes?', then 'What kind of job will allow me to have that kind of house, and to carry out my serving God.'

And so that's the way I've tried to proceed. In 2001, shortly before Suzanne and I were engaged, I was lining up a job with ABC Radio in Orange. But then we got engaged, and for a number of reasons, the Kingdom of God was going to be better served by my staying in Sydney. So I elected to stay, even though I can't stand Sydney and can't wait to get out.

That was 2001, and I'm still here. It's like the Hotel California.

It's a similar story for when we first came to Summer Hill: we chose the church first, and we were attending the church for a month before we found a place to live over here.

Likewise again now, we have to decide, 'As we think about next year, what's going to be the best thing for the Kingdom of God?' And it's complicated.

Do I start looking for some kind of career job, because under God at some stage we'll have children, and I'll need to earn enough to support my family? Providing for family members is part of obeying Jesus.

Do I say, God has given us worthwhile ministries at this church, so we're going to commit to stay here and work hard for another two years before revisiting our plans to go abroad?

Do I therefore take a less career-oriented job, so I have more time to write talks and Bible studies, more time to invite people over to our home, more time to do outreach? At the moment, with both of us working, I have the luxury to take a lower-paid job.

But you can see that what the best decision is in **my** circumstances won't necessarily fit **your** circumstances. Some of you have responsibilities for parents, responsibilities for children, responsibilities for

other people that you have to fulfil if you're going to live in the way that pleases Jesus.

But when you discuss this in a moment, don't fall into the trap of thinking that what you want and what Jesus wants are necessarily the same thing. Think about it seriously: are there changes you could make to your life that would be of benefit to God's Kingdom?

I would love for us as individuals and as a church, this week, this month, to force ourselves into a transition period, to ask the question, 'How can I better serve my creator and my redeemer as a member of his kingdom?'

When we ask the question, "Who am I?", I would love to see us define ourselves *first* as Jesus's people whom he has purchased, and let that shape the way we think of ourselves as parents, or accountants, or Australians, or whatever.

c priests

As well as being subjects in the kingdom, we have been made priests. We are to present King Jesus to a world in rebellion against him.

Sometimes we'll do that very overtly, as we knock on a stranger's door, and say, "Hi, my name's Stuart and I'm going around talking to people about Jesus."

Sometimes, our priestly ministry to the world will take a quieter form.

I was speaking with a woman recently who was talking about the difference being Christian made in her workplace. She raised the example of managing staff. Where some managers might pay little attention to the circumstances and needs of the staff, she made an effort to care genuinely for the people she was managing.

Now, of course, any good manager, Christian or not, will do that kind of thing. But if you do enough things like that, they mount up, and you have an opportunity to bless your colleagues. In that way, you can fulfil your rôle as Jesus's priest.

So these are some concrete examples of what it might look like to be a person whom Jesus has purchased to be a member of his kingdom and a priest.

What I'd love for us to do now, on our tables, is to spend 10–15 minutes talking about how this vision of Jesus ruling the world might make a concrete difference in your life. Talk with one another, toss ideas around, pray with one another, and see if you can make commitments that will see us living in a way that shows that we truly worship the lamb.