

# THE GREAT BREAKTHROUGH

by Ray C. Stedman

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In Chapter 4 of Revelation, John the Apostle was caught up into the presence of God in heaven. There he saw the throne of God and the court of heaven. Though the scene in Chapter 5 is still in heaven, the theme changes from the worship of the Creator to the worship of the Redeemer.

Both of these themes are often reflected in Christian hymns. One of my favorites praises God for his creative wisdom:

I sing the mighty power of God,  
That made the mountains rise,  
That spread the flowing seas abroad,  
And built the lofty skies.  
I sing the wisdom that ordained,  
The sun to rule the day,  
The moon shines full at his command,  
And all the stars obey.

It is both our duty and privilege to worship the Creator because all that we have -- life, talents, all ability -- comes from his creative power.

But the greater theme in the Scriptures is redemptive love, and we ought frequently to reflect that as well:

In the cross of Christ I glory,  
Towering o'er the wrecks of time.  
All the light of sacred story,  
Gathers round its head sublime.

In Chapter 5, John's gaze returns to the throne of God and he sees a strange sight which he describes in these opening verses:

**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. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. {Rev 5:1-4 NIV}**

Questions naturally arise when we read that: What does this scroll represent? Why is it sealed? Why is it written on the front and on the back? Who can be found to open it? What is required in order to open the scroll? This is not a book but a scroll, a rolled up paper or parchment with seven seals on the end so that as the seals are broken the scroll is unrolled and the writings upon it can be read. When we come to Chapter 6, next week, the opening of these seals and unrolling of this scroll will reveal certain momentous events which begin to occur upon the earth. Then we will know exactly what this scroll signifies. As it unrolls, we are carried on from Chapter 6 through Chapters 7, 8, and 9, and it is not until Chapter 10 that we find the scroll completely unrolled. It ends with the sounding of seven trumpets which are revealed when the seventh seal is broken.

In Chapter 10, verse 7, a clue is given to us as to what this scroll signifies. There John is told:

**But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets. {Rev 10:7 NIV}**

So this scroll is a "mystery" book. Its title is *The Mystery of God*. It answers questions that men have been asking for generations which no one has been able to answer. Why can't we solve the great problems of mankind? We hear much these days of the progress that humans have made -- tremendous technological advances, the wonders that science has produced -- and we pat ourselves on the back and say, "We are right on the verge of perfection." But when we look back on history we find that the truly great problems, the ones we wrestle with every day, are the same that men and women were wrestling with since the very dawn of time -- the problem of war, of conflict between human beings, the problems of crime, evil and prejudice -- these have always been with us. As far back in history as you can go, no one has made any advance in solving them. They are with us just as they were at the very beginning. Why can't we get a handle on these? Why can't we solve such problems? This scroll offers to answer that question.

One of the writers of our day, Annie Dillard, asks what she calls "the chief theological question of all time," "What the Sam Hill is going on here anyway?"

Do you ever feel that way? Things happen in your life and you cannot understand them. They seem to be without meaning or reason. You say with disgust, "What the Sam Hill is going on here anyway?" That is the question this scroll answers.

How will God ever straighten out this mess and fulfill his promise of a golden age when men will live in a world without war, without bloodshed, without hatred, without prejudice, when sorrow, death and tears have all been taken away? How is it to be brought about? Men have been dreaming of a world at peace, a utopia on earth, for centuries, but no one has found the answer.

Last week my wife ran across, in a contemporary magazine, a description of what one writer has thought would be a perfect world. Here it is:

No housework.  
No drug abuse.  
No prejudice.  
A relationship that works.  
More time with our families.  
A decent education for all.  
Clean air and water.  
A birth control pill for men.  
A car really built for families.  
Health (no AIDS).  
Happiness (no war).  
And the pursuit of a family-friendly workplace.  
That would be a perfect world!

Obviously this person does not expect God to have much to do with bringing that about. But that is what men have been hoping for. It is the purpose of this scroll to unveil God's way of bringing it into being. That is what the book of Revelation is all about.

This scroll, John says, was written both on the front and the back. The ancients seldom wrote on both sides of a scroll because one side was usually rough and uneven. Normally only one side was smoothed for writing. When both sides of a scroll were written on, it was an indication of a full and important message. This seems to indicate here that what will be unfolded as we go on is a complex and involved account. As we will see, that is very true. The very fact that it was written is significant. It was written to indicate there is no way to change it. God has written it and there is no possibility that anyone can change it. There is a famous line from the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam which says,

The moving finger writes, and having writ  
Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,  
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.

As Pilate said of his writing on the Cross: "what is written is written," {cf, John 19:22}. Nothing can change it.

Now John hears an invitation to all the universe, proclaimed by a mighty angel, that if anyone can open this scroll let him step forward. "Who is worthy," he cries, "to open the scroll?" It is the question that is the basis for all of politics. In every election year it is what we are asking, is it not? "Who is worthy? Who among us is capable of leading us into solutions to the problems that have been here for centuries? Who is smart enough? Who is moral enough? Who is worthy?"

Through the centuries there have been many volunteers. Nebuchadnezzar, in the Old Testament, claimed to be able to do so. He boasted of how cleverly he had built the great city of Babylon. But his empire soon fell apart. Alexander the Great thought he had accomplished it, and at the age of 32 wept because he had no more worlds to conquer. But a few months later he drank himself to death and his empire too was gone. Julius Caesar led the legions of Rome across the face of Europe trying to establish a world in which Roman peace would be prevalent. But it, too, fell ultimately to the assault of barbarians from the North. Charlemagne in France tried to do the same thing. So did Napoleon. Hitler, in our own day, thought he was establishing a thousand-year Reich that would rule the world. Yet all failed and failed dismally.

Even the best of men among us could not do it. We revere the name of George Washington and the wisdom of our first President, but he was not able to bring about a world at peace. Even Abraham Lincoln, with his mighty heart of compassion for both North and South, was not able to solve the basic problems of humanity. Whom should we add to the list? I read recently that there is a movement abroad to add Ronald Reagan to Mount Rushmore. I do not think he will make it, but even the four faces there could not solve the problems of history.

No wonder John wept! He wept and wept, he says, because no one could unseal the scroll or even look inside. No one knew how to go about it. None of the leaders of earth have a clue as to how to solve the issues that divide mankind and keep us from loving one another.

But then John learns that the problem is already solved. The 24 angels, the heavenly council around the throne of God, know the answer. One of them says to him:

**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." {Rev 5:5 NIV}**

"The Lion of the tribe of Judah" and "the Root of David" are both Jewish titles. They refer to prophecies from the Old Testament that predict there would be one from the tribe of Judah and from the family of David who would at last rule over the earth and solve its problems. These titles refer, then, to the King of the Jews -- the very title which Pilate inscribed on the Cross of Jesus. The King of the Jews! He is the One who triumphs by his death and is able to bring about God's kingdom on the earth.

But -- when John turns to see the conquering Lion of Judah, what he sees is the slain Redeemer of the world!

**Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. {Rev 5:6 NIV}**

He expected to see a Lion but what he saw was a Lamb, with the marks of death still upon him. One of the most moving hymns that blind Fanny Crosby ever wrote says:

I shall know Him, I shall know Him,  
As redeemed by his side I shall stand.  
I shall know Him, I shall know Him,  
By the prints of the nails in his hand!

Those marks of death are still upon the Lamb, and will be for all eternity. In these two symbols, the Lion of

Judah and the Lamb that was slain, John sees the uniting of two themes that run throughout the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament alike. Lions are a symbol of majesty, power, rule and authority. Lions conquer; lambs submit! Lions roar; lambs die! There is introduced to us here the One who conquers by submitting. The symbols tie together the earthly promises of Israel and the heavenly calling of the church.

It is strange how many commentators on Revelation ignore the Jewish element that is visible in these symbols. It is simply another clue that Israel is coming onto center stage again. When this scroll begins to unroll God is calling the nation back to the ultimate fulfillment of promises that they have long held, but never realized. The history of earth is now in view, and the key to that history is the nation Israel. It is all through the Bible. There is no ultimate blessing for earth until Israel is blessed. The Apostle Paul declares that plainly in the 11th chapter of Romans: "If their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" {Rom 11:15 NIV}. The time has now come for the restoration of Israel, as the prophets predicted, and as John sees in his vision.

This uniting of the Lion and the Lamb is the basis for C. S. Lewis' novels for children (and childlike adults), called "The Narnia Chronicles." A great lion, Aslan, rules in majesty and roars in triumph, but he does so because he submits to being put to death by the evil characters controlled by the White Witch, but at last the kingdom of Narnia is freed from its bondage to winter and the springtime of the world arrives. It is a beautiful use of these symbols.

As the Lion of Judah, Jesus will rule the world with a rod of iron. So the Second Psalm declares: "Though the nations rage, and the people imagine a vain thing; the kings of the earth take counsel together against the Lord, and against his Anointed ...Yet have I set my Son on my holy hill of Zion." {cf, Psa 2:1-3, 6}. Zion is symbolic for Jerusalem. In it Jesus shall reign with a rod of iron and dash the nations to pieces if they resist that reign. It is all predicted in that great prophetic Psalm.

As the Lion of Judah our Lord reigns, but if anyone is weak and faltering, helpless or hopeless, he or she will find a compassionate Savior -- because this Lion is also a Lamb! As the Lamb of God he is filled with mercy and grace, but if any should presume upon that grace and begin to live a rebellious or defiant life, let him beware -- because this Lamb is also a Lion!

According to John's vision, this Lamb has seven horns. Horns in Scripture speak of power, and seven is the number of fullness. So the Lamb has fullness of power on the basis of his death. Remember how Hebrews puts it: "He is able to save unto the uttermost all those who come unto God through him," {cf, Heb 7:25a KJV}. Jesus himself declared after his resurrection, "All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me," {cf, Matt 28:18 KJV}.

The seven eyes speak of full intelligence, discernment, by means of the Holy Spirit; an understanding of all the conflicting movements of human history. These seven eyes are the seven spirits of God which, as we have already seen, is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. In the first chapter of John's Gospel it is said of Jesus that he "does not need that any should tell him about man, because he knew what was in man," {cf, John 2:25}. He understands humanity. He, therefore, is the One worthy to take the scroll and remove the seals.

So John sees him here with the seven-sealed scroll in his hands.

**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. 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."** {Rev 5:8-10 NIV}

This is the worship of heaven. All there understand the meaning of history and the solution that is God's program. Each of these elders has a harp, and bowls of incense, fragrances, which, we are told, are the prayers of the saints. The slain Lamb is the center of their worship.

A harp symbolizes the music of inanimate creation. Not only will all creatures of the universe praise God and join in worship before him for his redemptive love, but creation itself -- the rocks, the trees, the mountains, the hills, the sea -- everything on earth, will praise him. Many of the Psalms reflect this in beautiful passages. As the strings of a harp vibrate in harmony, so the whole of creation will vibrate in an harmonious worship of God, each element of it fulfilling the intention which God had for it in the beginning.

The elders present also the prayers of the saints. How interesting that heaven understands that we who are redeemed also contribute to the work of redemption. We cannot lay the foundation (that Jesus has done perfectly), but we share in the application of it throughout the earth. Paul, in his letter to Timothy writes, "I exhort therefore that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men" {cf, 1 Tim 2:1} ... "for God would have all men to be saved and come unto the knowledge of the truth," {cf, 1 Tim 2:4}. That is what prayers do. When you are concerned about someone else and pray for him or her before the throne of God you are making possible an application of the work of redemption to that human heart. This ought to encourage us greatly in our prayers, for they are part of the program of God.

And, says John, he heard them singing a new song. The 24 elders and the four living creatures around the throne are singing a song they never felt themselves. It is new to them because, as angels, they have never been redeemed. They have had to learn of redemption by watching God's grace applied to sinners -- willful, rebellious, defiant men and women like us, who want their own way and whom, nevertheless, God calls, forgives, restores and saves. This is the song the angels have learned from the saints.

Another hymn expresses this. We do not sing it very much these days, but the chorus says:

Holy, holy, holy, is what the angels sing,  
And I expect to help them make the courts of heaven ring.  
But when we sing redemption's story they must fold their wings,  
For angels never felt the joy that our salvation brings.

This is the reason for the worship of heaven: It is the death of Jesus!

- Not his teaching,
- Not his wonderful life of compassion, or his miracles and wonders,
- Not his power,
- But the shedding of his blood for sinners of every age.

I never take the cup of communion without thinking of the words of Peter, "We are not redeemed with corruptible things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ as of a Lamb without blemish and without fault," {cf, 1 Pet 1:19 KJV}. I do not know any thought in all literature that is able to melt the human heart more than the concept that we who deserve death are given life at the cost of the blood of Jesus. That is what calls forth the new song of redemption. The old song is one of creation, but the new song is the song of the redeemed.

There is a chorus I have sung ever since I was a young Christian. I still sing it to myself when I am facing some strong temptation that powerfully allures me and I feel tempted to give in to it. It is a simple song,

He took me out of the miry clay.  
He set my feet on a rock to stay.  
He put a song in my soul today,  
A song of praise, Hallelujah!

There comes vividly to my memory a scene from my early manhood, 50 years ago in the city of Chicago. It was an Easter Sunday and I was living in a tiny little room in the North Avenue YMCA. I was up before

dawn, getting dressed to attend a great sunrise service in Soldier Field. As I was dressing, my eye fell upon an open hymn book on the dresser before me. It was opened to the hymn, "Beneath the Cross of Jesus." I read to myself the words of the second verse:

Upon that cross of Jesus mine eye at times can see  
The very dying form of One who suffered there for me;  
And from my smitten heart with tears two wonders I confess --  
The wonder of redeeming love, and my unworthiness!

My heart was melted when I read those words. I knew well my own unworthiness. But as I thought of the marvel of redeeming love, I felt as if the walls of that room faded away, and I, too, was standing with this great throng in heaven singing of the wonder of redemption -- God's love for mankind, manifest in the cross.

As John watches, all the universe is caught up in the wonder of that sacrificial love. He hears a great swelling volume of sound:

**Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousand, and ten thousand times ten thousand [Millions, even billions of angels]. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:**

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

**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. {Rev 5:11-14 NIV}**

This is clearly the basis for Handel's closing choruses in his oratorio *The Messiah*. It closes with one of the most beautiful musical numbers ever written, "Worthy is the Lamb." At the end of it everyone in the chorus joins in a repeated declaration, "Amen, Amen, Amen." It is a moving presentation, and the closest thing we have on earth to the scene described here.

You will recognize that this is the same scene that is presented by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians. He says, "He who was equal with God thought it not a robbery to lay aside the manifestations of deity and to take upon himself the form of a servant and become obedient unto death, even the death of the cross," {cf, Phil 2:6-8}. Because he was obedient unto death: "God has highly exalted him and given him the Name that is above every other name, that at the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth [the same divisions John sees], and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father," {cf, Phil 2:9-11}.

That is the worship of the entire universe: Everyone -- not only those in heaven and those left yet upon earth, but those under the earth (a reference to those who have already died, including those who die in unbelief and are found in hell) -- heaven and earth and hell together unite in acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus. Some will gladly confess it because they have understood and appropriated the death of Christ for themselves. Others will reluctantly acknowledge that he is indeed Lord. Many who today scoff at the Scriptures, who deride the Bible and defy the moral standards of God, will at last admit they are wrong and their life has been wasted. They have followed a will-o'-the-wisp, an illusion, a fantasy all their life. But at last the illusions are taken away and all creation acknowledges the Lordship of Christ.

John sees this in vision. It has not yet occurred on earth -- but it will!

When the seven-sealed scroll is fully opened, heaven and earth will join in this acknowledgment. That is the goal of all history. Every historic event for these many centuries is related to and moves toward that final goal of history.

It forces the question each must face. Everyone in this room will be involved in this worship, but the question will be, "Which group will you be with?"

Will you stand with those who gladly confess the Lordship of Jesus, or will you be with those who reluctantly acknowledge that he is right and they are wrong?

Only you can answer that question!

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