

## **Revelation 5:1-14, Royal Rule**

**All Saints Sunday, Nov. 6, 2016**

**Jonathan Wilson #**

### **Introduction**

Many of you know that I am a history scholar. Some other things about me fit that profile. Given a choice between an afternoon in a museum or in a ballpark: museum. Between reading and writing, or paying attention to a sports broadcast, I would rather read and write, unless the broadcast is of historical value, such as, Game 7 in a world series for a baseball team that had not seen a championship in over a hundred years.

But my love for museums, National Historical Sites, libraries and archives does not make me an antiquarian. Wanting the Cubs to win did not make we want to turn the country back to the lifestyles of 1908: The last time the Cubs won New Mexico and Arizona were not yet states, there were no radios, airplanes were for stunts not for passengers, ice and coal and milk were delivered by horse-drawn wagons, baseball was not integrated and neither was the rest of society, women could vote in Wyoming and that is about it. Let's leave the past where it is. The reason I am interested in history is that I am interested in the future, and to get a sense of what the future might bring I want to have a grip on how and why past events went down the way the way did.

In the Book of Revelation we discover a lot more about the future than some skeptics think, and a lot less than some enthusiasts imagine. We learn about the future those things that build the faith of any believer whether alive now, or whether they lived five hundred or a thousand or more years ago. We learn in Revelation 5 that the future is in the hands of Jesus Christ. That is good news for those who believe in him, for they have nothing to fear. We are

under the Royal Rule of the King of Heaven. He has sealed our citizenship by his own blood, and has given us the promise and the power to reign with him by his own Spirit. Let us pray.

**Lord God, author of life and salvation, through whatever the future holds help us to live in the assurance that our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, so that in bad times we will not despair, and in good times we will not forget you. In Jesus' name, amen.**

### **1. Sealing**

Many are anxious about what will happen this Tuesday, and next January, and the next four years. Revelation does not answers to those questions, because those are not the issues over which we should be fretting. In fact, we should not be fretting at all. We should not be anxious about tomorrow, much less the day after tomorrow. Even so, since being anxious and fretful is a normal human condition, God in grace has disclosed many promises to us to alleviate our fears and give us peace. We find many such promises in Revelation.

To begin with God says, "Let me show you who I am." The future is written on a scroll and God is its author. That scroll is sealed. Those seals are events of turmoil described in chapter 6 as the seals are broken. Angelic horsemen gallop across the earth leaving paths of destruction by war, plague and financial ruin. All of this looks random to worldly people, but believers can look upon these events with confidence that these things are in God's plan; they are the beginning of the birth pains by which God will re-create Heaven and Earth and raise the dead.

Second, God says, let me show you who Jesus is. John learns that no prophet or apostle would ever be allowed even a peak at those seals, much less be able to handle the scroll itself and unroll it, because no human being or angel anywhere, living or dead, has the holiness within themselves to be worthy to receive the scroll. But there is one: The Lion of Judah, the Christ of

God the Son of God and the Christ of Israel the descendant of David. Yet who appears on the throne, the Christ in glory, takes the form not of a lion but of a slaughtered lamb.

Which means, third, that for believers to understand our redemption in the future we need to remember what God has done in the past. The story of the Passover and Exodus of Israel is the chief model for understanding how the future will unroll, and the place the believers will have in the events. In the Exodus story God sends plagues to punish the world's most powerful empire on behalf of its lowest, poorest, most vulnerable segments of society, the ethnic minority Israelites who had been indentured into slavery. As those plagues touched Egypt they touched everybody, the Israelites too. And when those plagues first got going, Egypt's government responded by trying to make things even worse for the Israelites than they had been.

So the Israelites did what you and I do all the time. They fret, they forget, they complain. "Why did you even come here, Moses? Why couldn't you leave us alone? You've just made everything worse." But each plague is meant to reassure the Israelites and to warn the Egyptians, until it happens that God begins to make a distinction between most of the Egyptian territory and its segregated land of Goshen, down on the delta. Now hail only falls on Egyptian cattle, not on Israelites herds. Darkness only covers Egypt, not Goshen. Until we come to the grimmest judgment of all, the plague of the Angel of Death. The Israelites cover their homes under the blood of a slaughtered lamb to seal themselves into safety and keep the Angel of Death out. The Egyptians find death visiting each household, and that is when the Israelites pick up and go, leaving the land of worldly opulence and power and oppression behind them.

Revelation follows the model. Yes, the plagues of war and famine fall on believers and unbelievers alike and because we are human we believers fret and forget and complain. But God does make a distinction. In the plague of demons the believers are spared, only unbelievers

suffer those stings. The final plague, death, does not harm the believer in Jesus, because his blood seals us for salvation. Worldly people have death to fear from crime and terror and wars and famines and epidemics and the collapse of empires. Christians have nothing to fear from any of those things. Not any: If we die, our redemption is complete. Death is a judgment on the world for its faithlessness, but for believers it is the doorway into the glory and promises of God.

## **2. Reigning**

Now we come to the second promise for which the Exodus Story becomes another model. Verse 10 states, **You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.** We who are covered by the blood of the Lamb of God begin to reign as agents of God in the royal rule of Christ. Our governance is specific: Believers in Jesus Christ are the priesthood of the New Covenant that he inaugurated when he shed his blood for our sins. Israel in the Old Testament was set apart as a priestly nation before the whole world; the whole world was to come to know, through the witness of Israel, the righteousness and holiness of God. That was the priestly role of Biblical Israel.

Some scholars have read in this promise in Revelation 5 verse 10, that the Church replaces Israel as the community of salvation. I do not agree. I am persuaded that Israel's Christ reigns in heaven, and that Israel is and will always be the community of salvation, and that Israel encompasses the Church, not the other way around. Revelation does not make any distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. The blood shed by Jesus ransomed the whole community of God's People; it is still the one community of salvation over which reigns the eternal heir of the house of David, the Christ, the only wise God.

There are many ways that Jesus describes the New Covenant role by which Gentiles not only come to salvation but serve as priests. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus indicates that the

Church stands in line with the community of the prophets. In Revelation he indicates that, by the Church's function as a worshiping community the Church stands in line with the family of Aaron and the Tribe of Levi who had been set apart within ancient Israel to be its priests. We reign with Christ as his priests and prophets proclaiming and administering his salvation to the world.

There is disagreement among Revelation interpreters over when this reign with Christ will begin. Some say that it is a dominion that increases gradually until it will one day hold all the seats of political power. Others say that it is a promise to come true when Christ returns and establishes an earthly reign for a thousand years. These opinions depend on the reign with Christ being political in nature. But I interpret this text in line with others, who see that on the throne the one who is called the Lion of Judah is revealed to be a lamb, slaughtered, self-giving, meek.

Those who are staked on a political interpretation of this text will fret over how political winds shift here and there with their various hurricane gusts. For those who believe in the gradual increase in the dominion of God and the retreat of sin and darkness, any social and cultural set-backs become a crisis of faith. Others see it as a promise only of a future millennium, and that leaves us helpless as things get worse and the rapture STILL doesn't come. Rome was sacked, but where was the Rapture? In the seventh century Islam rose up to take over three-fourths of the territory once claimed by Christendom, but where was the Rapture?

We could sit around with a helpless faith, convinced that we have no power, and telling ourselves that things can't get much worse before the Rapture, when anyone who lived through the Black Death of the fourteenth century can tell you, yes, they can: Much much much worse than anything that is going to happen in America two days from now. Rather than holding our breaths, let us as Christians begin to live in the power of God, the power that rescues the sinner with the message of salvation. The Holy Spirit calls and invites us to be partners with Christ in

his rule. The future is in his hands. It is not our priesthood, or share of the royal rule, to fret about what God already has under control.

Let us be inspired to the ministry of Jesus Christ in word, water and blood, in revival and power, being priests for God so that more hearts and lives can be sealed for eternal life.

### **Conclusion**

The clear warning of the scriptures, not just in Revelation but from beginning to end right through the four gospels, is that to live for the world is to die in terror. But the gospel is even clearer, “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” And then, as Paul writes, for the believer “to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

To live is to be priests in the royal rule of Christ, and to die is to enter his glory. This is the promise inscribed in the Lamb’s Book of Life, the promise for which we are sealed by the blood of the One who sits on the throne with the future in his hands. No election, no act of terrorism, no epidemic or bomb or bullet, comes as a surprise to Jesus Christ. Indeed **neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.** We are covered by the blood of the Lamb of God. Amen.