

Who is worthy to open the book

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[0 : 00] Turn with me please to the second chapter that we read together, the book of Revelation, and chapter 5.

And to the question that is asked in verse 2. Who is worthy to open the book and to loose the seals thereof?

Who is worthy to open the book and to loose the seals thereof? The book of Revelation is more a picture book than a history book.

And it's a picture book that displays the multicolored wisdom of God. And each picture brings us more clearly to the conviction that our God reigns.

The man chosen by God to write this book is none other than the Apostle John, the beloved Apostle, the one who leaned on Jesus' breast at supper time and was persuaded by Peter to ask the Saviour who it was that should betray him.

[1 : 47] The Apostle also was asked by Jesus to look after and to care for his mother while he was hanging on the cross and to look after her after his decease.

This was the beloved Apostle John. John is suffering for these reasons and for no other reason. I wonder what John's thoughts were in the loneliness of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

Patmos being an island perhaps the size of Point, the High Peninsula, maybe 8 miles by 4, consisting of a solid black rock.

And that rock was quarried by slave labour and by prisoners. And here is John, alone, away from all others.

[3 : 14] I wonder what his thoughts were. Was there a precedent? Was there anyone else, any other, who believed in Jesus, who found themselves in their day alone?

John knew his Old Testament scriptures well. And no doubt his mind would have gone to the time when Jacob fled the family home in fear of Esau, his brother.

And there in the loneliness of the desert, as he lay down his head on the stone pillow, he dreamt. And when he awoke, he said, we recall this was none other than the house of God and the very gate of heaven.

God was able to meet with his people when they are very much alone and isolated and prisoners. And it was 20 long years before Jacob returned.

And it was a very different Jacob that came home. His name was now Israel. He was a prince with God.

[4 : 25] He had prevailed. He had overcome. Albeit he was limping. But he had prevailed. God met with Jacob when he was all alone.

Did he not also meet with Moses in his day? A man who had been trained in the best university of his day found himself in the backwoods of Midian 40 years as a shepherd.

What was the purpose of God for Moses' life? Was it a frustrated purpose? Oh, far from it. Moses was learning a lesson that could not be learned in any university of this world.

God was dealing with him in the loneliness the backwoods of Midian. What about the apostle Paul when God met with him on the road to Damascus and he was burning to preach the gospel and God said to him not yet.

Paul you have to learn lessons. you have to go into my training school and for three years in the Arabian desert Paul was taught by the spirit and then he was equipped to be the great preacher that he was.

[5 : 52] For he was to be shown how much he had to suffer for the sake of the gospel. And now here is John. But what about yourself? For all I know you might be in a similar situation not literally you're not on a desert island.

Perhaps you find yourself now maybe at a similar age to John your contemporaries having been taken home and you long to be with them but God says not yet.

I have much work to do in you and with you. In the summertime as the corn grows in the fields and we don't see much corn growing today in the summertime you try lifting a stalk of corn and with great difficulty you'll pluck it out of the soil but there'll be much soil attached to it.

You wait until harvest time and return to the same field and pluck another stalk of corn this time with great ease and with no soil attached.

The corn is now ripe it has no further need of the soil of this earth and the reaper does his work.

[7 : 21] And so it is with the God in whose hand we are he never makes a mistake he knows exactly how to deal with each one of us and how to shape us and here he was dealing with John I wonder what scripture John's mind returned to on this particular day he knew no doubt he knew the Old Testament words well but had he not been used also to write the fourth epistle the gospel according to John and had he not spent these precious years with the saviour and listened to him and watched him I wonder if you recall that occasion when the little boy came along with five loaves and two small fishes and the crowd was so great and how could they be fed and then the miracle of the loaves and the fishes took place and that night they crossed the sea of Galilee the sea of Tiberias and Jesus was not with them when the storm arose and then he came alongside in the night and said these immortal words be not afraid it is I and so to yourself today whatever your situation is perhaps with loneliness perhaps disconsolate perhaps with weariness that the journey is so long and the wilderness so hard and he says the same words be not afraid it is I and then they came to him the others they came at daybreak they came round the end of the lake and they joined up to him with him and he said to them you are seeking me not for the loaves not because he saw the miracles sorry but for the loaves labour not he said for the bread that perishes but for that which endures to life eternal and then they asked this question in that same context what shall we do that we might work the works of God and that's a great question what shall we do that we might work the works of God to which you return the answer this is the work of God that you believe on him whom he has sent and that's a lifetime's work it's not just believing in the moment of regeneration or of conversion it's not what Oliver

Cromwell once asked Dr. Owen said Cromwell to Owen is it true doctor that once you believe it is impossible to fall from grace yes said Owen it is true well said Cromwell I believed 30 years ago ah said Owen it's not what happened 30 years ago neither is it what happened 30 days ago the question Cromwell is how is it with you today this is the work of God that we go on believing against all odds and I'm persuaded that John was fully engaged in believing everything was stacked against him to all intents and purposes deserted all alone ah but how different heaven was not silent it was the

Lord's day morning and the revelation that the father was to give to the son was to be communicated to the beloved apostle by the son through the spirit and he was to write these things that he heard and that he saw and so we have this wonderful tapestry of the wisdom of God unfolded for us with regard to the outworking of his purposes until the end of time so John was in the spirit as the Lord himself met with him and coming to the question that's before us the question that was asked by the angel who is worthy to open the book and to loose the seals thereof well clearly it was a book that or rather a scroll that was well sealed and it was a scroll it was very unusual it had writing on both sides it was full of meaning it was replete with the purposes of God and it was sealed and the angel asked the question who is worthy to break the seal so that the scroll can be opened and its contents divulged we're not so used to sealed documents today as they were at this time so just to interest the young for a moment

I want to tell you about a seal that's very important I mentioned in the little story to you about my visit to Romania and it been a beautiful land well the lorry that we took with us that was filled with good things and necessary things was sealed and it was sealed before the lorry left the UK a very special seal it was stamped sealed locked and nobody could break that seal and as you transit eastern European countries particularly Hungary they look at the seal to make sure that it hasn't been broken and that nothing else has been added to it or taken from it and they add their own seal and so on until finally you arrive at your destination the lorry still being sealed unbroken its contents locked away and the only person who can open a seal is the customs man he has the authority and no other to break the seals and so he comes along and with a special tool he breaks that seal and the door is unlocked and the contents are checked something similar here these scrolls have been

rolled up and they have been bound and they have been sealed and says the angel who's worthy who has the authority to open to break the seal and to reveal the contents of the scroll and then john says and there was no man in heaven or on earth or under the earth who was worthy to open the book or to look there on well if there was no one in heaven and there was no one on earth and there was no one under the earth no wonder john wept no one in the regions above no one that he could see on the earth and no one from the regions beneath who was capable who had the authority to open the book no wonder he wept but I think there was another reason for john sweeping and it concerned the contents of the scroll or of the book

I wonder what was there written that caused john to weep there are two books mentioned in the revelation there is this book and there is another book called the book of life so john is intensely concerned and I think he's concerned that the glory of god and god's purposes ought not to be thwarted or frustrated and so he weeps you see john's circle doesn't begin at the circumference it begins at the center john has his priorities right he begins with god and he works his way out to himself and how often the process is reversed we begin at the circumference with ourselves and only when we reach the end of our resources do we return to where we ought to have begun at the center john weeps because the glory of god is intensely bound up with the contents of this scroll that after all is the great purpose of our creation as our catechism reminds us man's chief end man's real purpose is to glorify god to acknowledge his glory and to recognize it and to bow before him in obedience and in worship that's our real purpose and anything else is diversionary well who was to open this book well it's interesting that the answer comes not from an angel but from one of the elders in verse 5 we read this one of the elders said to me weep not behold the lion of the tribe of judah the root of david has prevailed to open the book and to loose the seven seals thereof john uses very rich language here he speaks about beasts and elders and angels who are they well there are various interpretations but it seems that the elders the 24 elders represent the whole of the church there were 12 tribes of israel and there were 12 apostles so taking the old and the new together here you have the representatives of the church of christ and it is through them that the message comes to john not to weep because the lion of the tribe of judah the root of david he has prevailed or he has overcome now that means of course that whoever this is has been engaged in battle you don't overcome sitting in an armchair by your fireside you overcome in the field of battle so here is one who had not been in heaven or on earth or under the earth here is the wisdom of god displayed in the fullness of time and said the angel to his mother his name shall be called jesus for he shall save his people from their sins he was born not just to set a good example and to live a perfect life he was born

[19 : 49] to die someone has put it very concisely without the incarnation the atonement would be impossible and without the atonement the incarnation would be meaningless he was born to die and he was born to set sinners free and the battle in which he was engaged was an intensive battle and I just have time to focus on two aspects of that battle he came as the last Adam the first having been excluded from the garden and to ensure that he could not return and partake of the tree of life there was placed there cherubim with flaming swords two edged swords which guarded the way to the tree of life and that throughout the old testament right down to the question that I think it

Zechariah asks concerning this sword that turned this way and that smite the shepherd he said awake oh sword against my fellow and smite the man or smite the shepherd and here in reality in the garden in another garden in the garden of Gethsemane the sword of God's justice which had lain dormant is now unsheathed and the son God's own son has to face this two edged sword and in going out to meet this sword and prostrate to the ground in a bloody sweat he meets the sword we know that it was a cold night in

Gethsemane the others had fallen asleep John included and he was all alone having gone that much further even a stone's throw and prostrate on the ground he faced for the first time the cup of the father's wrath and finally he submitted willingly not my will he said but thine news be done and then he awoke them that was the sword of God's justice and God's anger doing its work we know that the word tells us that God is love and praise his name for that but God's character is not just a character of love God's character is multifaceted it has many sides to it and it also has this side God's justice God's holiness God's righteousness God cannot simply overlook sin it has to be dealt with because the guilty sinner must be punished and here said Luther was the greatest sinner from one point of view that ever lived here in the garden experiencing the wrath of God against sins not his own and we know what happened the following morning and at Calvary's cross and in the

darkness the forsaken of Calvary in the aloneness not just had his disciples forsook him and fled but his father had hidden his face from him here is the display of God's love as nowhere else and at the same time we see

God's justice in action here was the sword that the last Adam went out to meet and he met it and he sheathed it and he put it away forever here is the lion of the tribe of Judah here is the root and the offspring of David having completed the work that the father gave him to do he alone is worthy to open the book and so John's tears are dried up and he has seen at last the one who has come and who has conquered and who has prevailed and so the contents of the book are opened and you may read the chapters that follow at your leisure there these chapters they contain the judgments of God against sin

[25 : 06] I said a little while ago that God cannot overlook sin sin must be judged and sin must be punished John knew full well that his exile in Patmos was not on account of his sin not on account of his failure to stay awake that night John's theology is this it's because we have sinned if God should mark iniquity against us who would stand or who could stand John knew that God had a work to do in his life was John to appear at the bar of God's judgment right or would it just be the unrighteous and the wicked who will appeal there and what will happen on the great day well from one point of view nothing new will happen the books will be opened and the most graphic eloquent and majestic account of the judgment is given by Christ himself in

Matthew's gospel on the 25th chapter towards the end of that chapter where he will say to his own come ye blessed of my father and then he will delineate for them what they had done for him and they will turn to him and say but when did we do that for you and he will reply and say in as much as you did it to the least of one of these my disciples you did it for me and then he will turn to the others and they will be dismissed there are times when God comes near to judgment in this life to conclude with a brief illustration of that just two weeks ago today I was in a village church in the Russian satellite country of Moldova and the congregation numbered maybe about fifteen and they met it was an open air meeting the outside gates were closed the pulpit was just a kitchen table with a cloth spread over it and the word was there why didn't they meet in a building such as this well they were in the process of constructing such a one and last year the Romanian Orthodox priest in the village said to his parishioners I'm going off to Moscow I want that church destroyed before I return and so dead of night the church was dismantled and the believers had nowhere to worship the priest returned and there was celebrations shortly after that this man contracted mysterious stomach pains and he recognized one way or another that his days on the earth were numbered and he came to the believers to ask forgiveness and so too did some of his congregation shortly after that he died and as the man who was telling me the story said in his own words in the broken English God broke his stomach God broke his stomach reminiscent of what happened in the acts of the apostles is it not and two of the congregation that evening were two who were responsible for dismantling and destroying that church God had mercy on them and here they were now joining with believers there are times when God visits in judgment but the day will certainly come when the books will be opened and the small and great will stand before the throne and the judge is none other than the lion of the tribe of Judah also the lamb of God who has overcome and who has prevailed will John be judged will those who have believed in him be judged not in the same way as the unbelievers at the resurrection believers were told believers been raised up in glory shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted and made perfectly blessed to the full enjoying of God to all eternity their names are written in the lamb's book of life now what about yourself

I can hear you saying almost I wish I knew that my name was written there well this is true of all whose names are written in the lamb's book of life they once were in the far country they had to recognize their sinnership they had to come with confession and with contrition of heart they had to repent they had to believe and they came and they followed and these are the ones who will be acquitted may it be that everyone within these walls without exception will come to know him as their own and to confess him and certainly those who know him and have not confessed him publicly don't let the next communion season pass by in a disobedient condition his blessing is with those who are of