

A REALITY CHECK (PT. 1) REVELATION 5:6-12

The last few weeks have been a reality check, to say the least. Before the Coronavirus pandemic, reality, for most people, was going to work each day, keeping up at school, shopping at the grocery store, paying the bills, and going to the ballgame. Reality was buying a new dress for Easter, going to a restaurant, and getting together with loved ones. Reality was a stable economy, the lowest unemployment rate in history, and a record-breaking bull market.

Of course, these “realities” have, at least temporarily, disappeared, forcing us to consider what is *ultimate* reality. Is there a reality that is impervious to the Coronavirus, a reality that is invincible, unshakable, and immovable, a reality that transcends that which is temporary and transient?

In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John describes a scene that gives us a glimpse of ultimate reality. In chapters 4 and 5 he writes about being ushered into heaven, where he encounters a Person who is sitting on a throne. This Person is so visually stunning, so magnanimous, so glorious that every living being in heaven is enthralled with Him. Indeed, they cannot take their eyes off Him but are spontaneously and enthusiastically worshipping Him.

It is immediately apparent to John that they are worshipping this person not only because of who He is, but because of what He has done. And the magnitude of what He has done is so marvelous and so consequential they cannot stop contemplating it, they cannot stop commenting on it, they cannot stop praising Him for it. Look at **Revelation 5:6, 8-10**.

⁶ Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne [in heaven], encircled by the four living creatures and the elders... ⁸ The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb... ⁹ And they sang a new song: “You are worthy...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.”

Keep in mind that John is witnessing something that finite minds are incapable of fully comprehending. What he sees in heaven is so spectacular, so unlike anything in this earth realm, that it is impossible to adequately describe it with human language. But he likens the Object of worship to a Lamb that looked as if it had been slain. In other words, this Person was visibly scarred and disfigured because of the trauma he had experienced in death.

Though John’s vision of a sacrificial Lamb may be difficult for us to imagine, its meaning is clear. The Object of heaven’s worship is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. And one of the reasons why angelic beings cannot take their eyes off Him, cannot stop falling down before Him, and cannot stop singing His praises is because He bears the visible marks of *death*.

Which is remarkable because *heaven* and *death* are utterly incompatible, or so it would seem. Heaven is the place where *life* is celebrated and where any resemblance of *death* is non-existent, or so it would seem. And yet on this throne in heaven, center stage, in the place of supreme honor, is a Person who bears the marks of the death He experienced while He lived on earth. He is being worshiped in heaven, at least in part, *because* He died, and more specifically, because He shed His blood.

Look again at **verses 9**. *And they sang a new song: "You are worthy...because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."*

Do you see why these heavenly beings are so enthralled with this One sitting on the throne? This Person is the *eternal* Son of God. This is the One whose wisdom and power is so great that when He decided to bring planets, galaxies and constellations into being He merely spoke a word and it was so. This is the One who is absolutely sovereign—who controls all things and sustains all things and has authority over all things. This is the One whom these angelic beings and heavenly creatures had been worshiping from the moment they were created. And there were plenty of other things about Him to admire and adore without them ever becoming tired or bored or disinterested.

Yet what seems to astound these heavenly beings the most, what seems to take their worship to even *greater* heights is that this Person would do what He did to make Him now appear to them as a Lamb who looked as if it had been slain.

You see, these angels knew about those microscopic creatures called human beings on that miniscule planet called earth. They knew about God's adversary, Satan (an angel like them), and how he had deceived Adam and Eve, the first humans, into disobeying their Creator and how, as a result, he was given dominion over the earth and everything in the earth realm came under the curse of sin. They knew that every human being was born under this curse with a sin nature, compelling them to disobey and dishonor and even defy the God who made them.

These angels had seen the destructive, devastating effects of humanity's sin, and especially how it broke the heart of God. And perhaps they wondered why God hadn't just flicked that earth with His finger, sending it into oblivion, so that He could be done with it once and for all.

And then, wonder of wonders, mystery of mysteries, these angelic beings and heavenly creatures saw the eternal Son of God lay aside many of His divine rights and prerogatives and change His form, entering that cursed earth realm and actually become one of those human beings—a fetus at first who grew full term until He was born as a baby, who grew into a toddler, and a teenager and ultimately a man. Who lived thirty three years on earth, taunted and tempted by Satan, yet never succumbing; perfectly obeying His heavenly Father; and then knowingly and willingly allowing Himself to be brutally murdered on a cross, shedding His blood, and, in so doing, purchasing those pitiful human beings for God.

Do you understand why angelic beings and heavenly creatures are so astounded by the visibly scarred and disfigured Lamb on the throne? Do you see why they cannot stop praising the One who shed His blood? It's because they knew the inherent *power* in that blood; they knew that blood made it possible for humanity to be ransomed and redeemed. Most of all, they knew, and were utterly amazed, that Jesus died for these sinners out of pure love for them—a love that compelled Him to save them.

You see, sin is utterly offensive to a holy God, and yet every one of us is hopelessly infected by sin, destined to live under its curse and then spend eternity in a place of eternal torment. These angelic beings knew man's hopeless predicament, that man owed a debt because of sin that only man could pay, yet none is able to pay it.

And that's why Jesus volunteered to become a man. Since *sinful* man is incapable of securing his salvation from sin's curse and punishment, He, the *holy* Son of God, became a

man so that He could be our Substitute and pay our debt for us. This is how the prophet Isaiah described what Jesus did: ⁵ *But He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed.* ⁶ *All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on Him the sins of us all (Isaiah 53:5-6 NLT).*

When Jesus died on the cross, He bore our sins in His body and experienced our punishment. He was the sinless Lamb of God whose blood provided a ransom, whose blood was the necessary payment so that we could be purchased for God, so that God's justice could be satisfied, so that sin's curse could be broken, so that the spiritual forces of evil could be defeated, so that we could be forgiven, so that we could have eternal life.

Jesus did this because He loves us, and all of heaven is and will forever be astounded at the depth of that love. Look at **verses 11-12**, 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 honor 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 honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!"*

This, dear friends, is *ultimate* reality. Ultimate reality is what is going on in the heavenly realms even as I speak. Ultimate reality is Jesus Christ sitting on a throne, and everything in the universe revolving around Him. Ultimate reality is redeemed human beings and angels surrounding His throne, so enthralled with Him, so enamored by Him, that they cannot take their eyes off Him. Ultimate reality is the One on that throne bearing the visible marks of His death, reminding us for all eternity that it was by His death that we are allowed to be in His glorious presence.

And the *reason* this is ultimate reality is because what Jesus did on that cross is the once-for-all payment that satisfied the just demands of God, and nothing more is necessary to secure our eternal salvation. It is ultimate reality because nothing or no one can ever remove Jesus from His throne. And it is ultimate reality because nothing or no one can ever separate those whom He has redeemed from His love.

Everything is changing every day.

There are things we thought would last forever that fade and slip away.

But you can set your feet upon this Rock that will not move, you can trust all your tomorrows to this never changing truth:

Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

A LIVING HOPE (PART 2)

REVELATION 5:6-12

Years ago, I received an unforgettable letter that, I believe, is a parable for the times in which we now live. It was written by Ron Walters, a vice president at Salem Communications, and this is how it begins: “Greyhound racing is not your average sport. Neither is the greyhound your average mutt. Whereas these sleek animals are built for speed, they’re wired for naps. They’re the couch potatoes of the animal kingdom. They’re docile and quiet and rarely bark.

“But put them on a racetrack and they’re all business. They’re NASCAR with fur, canine lightning. In short, one of nature’s fastest creatures. Their uncanny speed is made possible by a combination of long, powerful legs, large lungs and heart, a unique aerodynamic build with a double suspension gallop, and a flexible spine. This fluid combination allows greyhounds to reach speeds of 45 mph in less than 1½ seconds, or within 3 strides.

“Each race begins as the dogs are lined up in the starting gate. They know what’s coming: a mechanical rabbit—a furry covered mechanism... suspended on a metal rod circling the track from the inside railing. As the rabbit passes, the starting bell sounds, the gates fly open, and the dogs have one mission—to catch the speedy rabbit! The first dog to cross the finish line is the winner.

“At least that’s how it’s supposed to happen. But, in one race, it didn’t. One greyhound race made these headlines: *“Rabbit goes nuts, dogs go crazy!”*

It was a racing night like any other. The track was fast, the grandstands were full, the bets were placed, and the race was on. But for some unexplainable reason, while the dogs were in mid-chase, the little mechanical rabbit exploded. Parts and pieces were thrown all over the track. Quickly the greyhounds came to a screeching halt to survey the wreckage. These perfectly bred and highly trained dogs saw their life’s goal go up in smoke and they didn’t know what to do.

- Two of them lost their balance and fell, causing serious injuries. Both had to be put down.
- One dog went back to the starting gate, lay down, and shook all over.
- Two dogs, uncharacteristically, started fighting.
- One chased his tail around and around.
- One sniffed each piece of the furry debris while whimpering
- One was so startled he became disoriented and began running the track in the opposite direction.

Walters concludes, “What a waste. Finely tuned and beautiful animals completely lost when their only goal in life—to catch a make-believe rabbit—blew up in their faces” (Ron Walters, Vice President of Church Relations, *Salem Communications*).

Do you see what I mean about this story being a parable for our times? In the last few weeks, some of the things we have been so feverishly chasing, some of the things we have placed our hope in, some of the things we have depended on to provide meaning and security have exploded right before our eyes. And just like that mechanical rabbit, they have proven to be fragile and hollow and artificial.

And it has happened so quickly. A year ago—even six months ago—who could have predicted how quickly life as we know it could come to a screeching halt, how quickly our

sources of income could dry up, how quickly our health could deteriorate? Who could have predicted that the places that have been hit hardest by this health pandemic are the healthiest, wealthiest, most advanced countries in the world?

In the span of a few short weeks we have discovered that some of the things we thought were rock solid are made of Jell-O, some of the things we thought were unsinkable can go under in no time at all, and some of the things we *thought* were permanently nailed down have not only come loose—they've disintegrated. And these discoveries have forced us to come face to face with a sense of our own vulnerability; a realization that we don't have as much control over our lives as we thought; that bad things can happen to us that *no* amount of precaution, *no* amount of technological sophistication, or *no* amount of financial or medical expertise can prevent.

And that sense of vulnerability has left some of us, just like those greyhounds, dazed, disoriented, anxious, and afraid.

What do we do? Where do we turn? Whom can we trust? Is it possible to hope in something that will *never* fail and *never* disappoint? Is it possible to have a hope that can withstand *any* kind of hardship, no matter how extreme and how devastating?

I'd like to read a passage of Scripture from a letter that Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, wrote. He begins his letter with these words: *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time... Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls"* (1 Peter 1:3-5; 8-9).

Peter is writing to believers in Jesus. Please don't confuse "believers" with churchgoers or do-gooders. And please don't confuse "believers" with those who simply believe that Jesus *existed*, or think that he was a great prophet and teacher. *Believers* are those who have put their faith and trust *in* Jesus and what He did for them—who believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that He died on the cross for their sins, that when He hung on that cross He bore their sins in His body and was actually punished, by God, for their sins.

Believers are those who believe that three days after Jesus died He rose from the dead winning the victory over their ultimate enemy, death, and proving that He is who He said He was, that He is God's provision for the forgiveness of their sins, and that He is the One who puts them right with God.

I find it interesting that Peter, who was as close to Jesus as anybody, who was present when Jesus was crucified and who spent a lot of time with Him after He rose from the dead, was still astonished at what Jesus had done, even though he wrote this letter thirty years after Jesus had risen from the dead.

Here's a man who had seen a lot of things in those years. He'd seen thousands of people put their faith in Jesus and become children of the living God. He'd seen the Good News about Jesus spread across the known world and reach every major city in the Roman Empire. But he had also experienced tremendous hardship and persecution because of his faith in Jesus. He had been publicly beaten and imprisoned on more than one occasion. He had seen many of his fellow disciples martyred for their refusal to renounce Jesus. And yet

Peter could never get over this marvelous miracle of new birth. He was still full of wonder and praise for the transformation that occurs when someone believes in Jesus.

Look again at what he says. **Verse 3.** *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...”*

I believe Peter is intentionally comparing this “living hope” with things in this world that we typically place our hope in. Institutions, religion, social programs, policies, technology, money, power, hard work, ingenuity, resourcefulness, people.

But we’ve been reminded recently that when we put our hope in anything in this world, we will inevitably be disappointed, because nothing in this world is completely dependable. The Bible says, “Everything in this world is passing away” (1 John 2:16). That includes people—even people that love us and do everything in their power to protect us and make sure that we are safe and secure—because every person will eventually die.

Which brings us to that *living* hope, a hope that transcends the things in this world, a hope that is impervious to even the most extreme hardships, a hope that remains solid even when our circumstances are falling apart. It’s the hope of eternal life, which Peter describes in **verse 4** as *“...an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you.*

An inheritance is something of value given to the heirs of an estate. Stop and think about this for a second. Those who are believers in Jesus Christ, those who have been born again, are the heirs of God—co-heirs with Jesus Christ. No wonder Peter is excited.

You see, God owns it all. And the wealth we see on this earth is just a drop in the bucket. We’re talking about galaxies and constellations and treasures and places and things we can’t even imagine. But it’s way more than *things*. We’re talking about a depth of love and peace and joy that no one on this earth has come close to experiencing. And Peter is saying that God wants to share it with us and let us enjoy it for all eternity.

And this inheritance is unlike any other inheritance because it cannot be damaged or diminished. It won’t ever depreciate. It will never tarnish or lose its luster. It won’t ever wear out, and it can’t ever be used up. And no one can ever take it away from us because it is presently being preserved and protected for us in heaven.

And that hope of heaven is not a pipe dream or wishful thinking. It’s not a prediction or a gamble, it’s a guarantee. That’s what is meant by a “living” hope. It is sure, certain, real. Why? Because Jesus has risen from the dead. Jesus guaranteed our eternal life when he conquered death. Our hope is living because he is living.

I want to submit to you that what Jesus did two thousand years ago on a Sunday morning three days after He died on the cross and was buried is the most consequential event in the history of the world.

Jesus’ resurrection proved that He was who He said He was—Messiah, Son of the living God. It demonstrated His divine power. It established that His death on the cross did accomplish what He said it would—the forgiveness of sins and the defeat of the powers of darkness. It proved that Jesus was telling the truth when He said, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26).* It is the event that has literally altered the course of man’s destiny.

And it can alter the course of your destiny if you believe that Jesus did what He did for you.

The question is: Do *you* believe in Him? Do you believe that He died on the cross for

your sins, and that He rose from the dead to defeat your ultimate enemy, death? Have you put your trust in Him to forgive you of your sins, to reconcile you to God, and to give you eternal life?

It's possible that there are barriers standing in the way of you receiving these gifts. Some of you have been hurt. Perhaps there was a time in your life when you needed God, and you cried out to Him and you felt like He left you stranded at a time when you were desperate, and you made up your mind right then that all this talk of a loving God was nonsense.

Perhaps you have been burned by people who profess to be Christians. You've heard their double talk, you've seen their hypocrisy, and you've resolved that if that's what it means to be a follower of Jesus you want no part of it.

Maybe you just can't believe that this business about Jesus is really true. You don't know how to reconcile the Bible with science, you can't understand why God would allow so much tragedy and heartache and suffering.

Maybe you can't believe God really loves *you*. You feel like you've failed so bad and so often, and you've fallen so hard that you believe God could never be anything but mad at you.

Friend, whatever the barrier that has kept you from receiving God's gift of forgiveness and friendship and eternal life I'd like to just say this to you: God knows. God cares. You may not feel it, but it's true. It's true because Jesus Christ died on the cross for *your* sins and then rose from the dead to secure eternal life for *you*. And if death proved not to be a barrier for Jesus, then your issues are certainly not a barrier for Him either. God can break down your barrier if you'll just let Him.

But you must let Him. Those barriers will only be broken down if you're honest with Him. If you're angry with God, tell Him—He can take it. If you don't believe in God, ask Him to reveal himself to you, and He will. And if you want to be assured of eternal life then confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that Jesus is the risen Lord, let Him into your life, turn your life over to Him.

Turning your life over to Him simply means you confess your sin and unbelief, that you give up control of your life, and let Him invade you with His love and grace. You do that and He will forgive your sins and give you a purpose for living, He will give you a hope that will never fail and never disappoint, a hope that can withstand any hardship.