Hope in Troubled Times

A scroll, a slain Lamb, and the view from heaven when the world is burning

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, June 14, 2020
PASSAGES	Revelation 5; Romans 8:17; Romans 12:15; Hebrews 5:8; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Matthew 5:9
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:00:18 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

John saw Revelation 5 in a time of brutal persecution: a sealed scroll no one could open, and then a Lamb, standing as though slain, who alone was worthy. That scene from heaven tells a troubled church four things – honor belongs to the Lamb, history is in God's hands, people from every tribe belong to him and to each other, and worship is our calling now and forever.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When troubles become inescapable, the church should not ignore them or treat them lightly, but embrace them and ask what the Lord would have us do.
- The prayers of the saints are kept in golden bowls before the throne. Our prayers matter, so do not stop praying in troubled times.
- The Father has given the slain Lamb authority to bring history to its close. Not an emperor, not a virus – God alone holds history.
- Suffering is part of God's plan for forming his people, but his purpose is that one day all suffering will cease.
- In heaven no one belongs more than anyone else. The ground is level, and that puts an end to racial superiority.

- Every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth and in the sea joins the worship. Worship is the core of our lives, every day.
- Weep with those who weep. George Floyd was a brother in Christ, and how he was treated should grieve us.

▶ 1:00:52

Geno began with news: the following Sunday Hope would hold its first indoor service since the shutdown, limited to about forty people, masked and spaced. Then he told the congregation about a painful week.

A week of lament

▶ 1:02:29

On Tuesday evening the family had to put down his daughter's dog, a friend of a decade who was suffering badly, and it broke her heart. On Thursday at his monthly lunch with pastors he has known for twenty-five or thirty years, a dear friend, a black pastor in Austin, began to lament the brutality in the culture, among police and rioters alike, and how black men continue to be abused by police. It was not a conversation about what is wrong with America, Geno said, so much as a good man's hurting heart, and he lamented with him.

▶ 1:03:30

Then at 4:30 on Friday morning, a police officer from Hope posted his own long lament on the church's online forum about how hard these times were for officers – drawing more responses than any post in its history. "These things have become inescapable," Geno said, "and I think as the church we should not ignore these things. We should not treat them lightly." So how do we navigate these waters? We learn to abide and walk in hope.

A book for troubled times

▶ 1:05:50

He turned to a passage Hope loves, Revelation 5, a scene of worship, one of the few things that continues into heaven. But first the background. Around AD 64 a fire burned two-thirds of Rome, and Nero blamed the Christians, reportedly lighting garden parties with Christians burned as torches. A few years later Jews in Palestine revolted under a crushing tax, and in AD 70 Rome flattened Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. About twenty years after that came another imperial persecution under Domitian, which the historian Eusebius described, and Revelation was written around then.

▶ 1:09:09

Christian tradition holds that John himself was boiled in oil and suffered to the end of his days, exiled on Patmos, where he saw the vision. Behind the book lies horrendous persecution. It was written to people struggling in troubled times, "and so it speaks to us today very clearly."

The scroll and the Lamb

▶ 1:10:10

> "Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'"
>
> REVELATION 5:1–5 ↗

"Worthy" means having the authority, the right. And no one had it – that is the point.

▶ 1:11:25

> "And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints."
>
> REVELATION 5:6–8 ↗

In the very center of authority stands a slain Lamb. And Geno paused on the golden bowls: the prayers of the saints are collected and poured out at the right time. "In troubled times we get discouraged and we stop praying: 'It's not doing any good.' The Bible says something entirely different. Our prayers matter."

▶ 1:12:25

> "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'"
>
> REVELATION 5:9–10 ↗

▶ 1:12:55

> "Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!' And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!' And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshiped."
>
> REVELATION 5:11–14 ↗

1. Great honor

▶ 1:14:04

The Father honors the Son and his sacrifice by giving him authority to bring history to a close. Breaking the seals sets in motion the final judgment, when the righteous are rescued and God's enemies punished. Hear that, Geno said, in the context of three decades of horrible persecution: God is not in the least shaken. Only the slain Lamb had paid the price to redeem people from every tongue and tribe, so only he could loose the tide of history God had been holding back. We should honor the one the Father has honored.

2. Great hope

▶ 1:15:46

The ebb and flow of history is in God's hands alone – "not a vicious emperor or a pandemic virus." Our suffering will not be pointless. Geno added that nowhere does the Bible say God's will is for his people never to suffer; God uses suffering to form us, and he doubted anyone becomes a genuine follower of Christ any other way. But God's purpose is that one day all suffering will cease, and only the Lamb can bring that kingdom.

▶ 1:17:24

So followers of Christ should never despair – watching the nation burn, the elderly dying of a virus, the economy withering under government edict. From heaven's perspective, our present troubles will not last; only our faith will. He repeated a line from Jackie Humphrey, an older woman in the church whose son worried she had been exposed to the virus: "God has numbered my days, not the virus." In John's day, Geno added, you could say, "not the emperor."

3. Great belonging

▶ 1:19:16

A multitude from every tribe, language, people and nation abides around the throne, cleansed by his blood and adopted into God's family. That is God's creative diversity on display, and he loves it all: "These are my people, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb." And the ground is level. We are co-heirs with Christ, with equal access to the Father and equal humility, since none of us paid our own way. "How does anyone have any superiority over anybody else?"

▶ 1:21:06

Belonging to God means belonging to one another as siblings. In John's day, Romans, Greeks and Jews were killing each other, driven by power, greed and, make no mistake, race. Yet in heaven John saw diversity all belonging because of Jesus. It inspires "a hope-filled vision where there's no racism, only brothers and sisters who love Jesus," and it speaks directly to the nation's turmoil.

4. Great worship

▶ 1:22:09

The chapter ends with one of the greatest scenes of worship in the Bible, and Geno loved that it includes every creature, in heaven, on earth, under the earth and in the sea. Are there animals in heaven? He thinks so. Will we talk to them? He sees no evidence, but at least we will hear them praising God. "Heaven's going to blow our minds." So yes, evangelize and draw people to Christ – but worship is a core element of life, not just on Sunday but every day: "I'm going to join the heavenly throng, but right now, today, I honor you."

Walking in hope

▶ 1:24:21

His invitation came in four parts. Honor Jesus, who died to offer escape from the judgment of sin and the grave, who holds history in his hands, and whom we honor by helping those far from God find him. Walk in great hope: the Lord of history has his people and their struggles in mind, sees the persecution and turmoil, and will one day unroll the scroll – and he will not give us more than we can bear.

▶ 1:25:39

Embrace people who are not like us – literally go and find them, especially in the household of faith. That morning, Geno said, the Spirit seemed to hover as the worship team sang "Way Maker," which had topped the worship charts for weeks and spread worldwide like no other song – written by a worship leader in Nigeria. "I don't think it's ironic. I think it's beautiful." Saying "I don't fully understand your culture, but I see the Spirit of Jesus in you, and I love you" would go a long way.

▶ 1:27:21

Weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice. "George Floyd was a brother in Christ," Geno said, and the way he was treated should bother us – because he was a brother. And finally, lift up praise to the Lamb as part of life. Sunday was often his best day of the week, worshiping twice that morning, outside and in. He prayed that God would grant Hope this heavenly perspective, to join the saints, angels and all creation in praising the only one worthy, and draw the church together "because we belong to each other, because we belong to you."

Questions

▶ 1:32:15

Matt asked: if God uses suffering, should we pray for healing? Geno pointed to the early church fathers' answer on persecution – don't seek suffering out, but don't hide from it either. The Son of God learned obedience through what he suffered, and Peter says we follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21). Yet his default is still to pray for healing and relief, with faith, while leaving the outcome to God. "We have to hold both." Often God brings relief even when he does not bring complete healing.

▶ 1:34:17

On standing for Christ in a binary, hostile culture: the Christian voice should often be the voice of nuance, able to hear the truth on more than one side – though there is nothing in white supremacy to agree with. "When you're a bridge, you get walked on by both sides." Social media is not the place for nuanced conversation, and Christians should not be in "the screaming business."
Blessed are the peacemakers. The rest – animals in heaven, and whether there will be cockroaches – and the details of the first indoor service took the Q&A to its end, with outdoor worship continuing all summer as, many said, a witness to the neighborhood.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Revelation 5:1–5
- Revelation 5:6–8
- Revelation 5:9–10
- Revelation 5:11–14
- Romans 8:17
- 1 Corinthians 10:13
- Romans 12:15
- Hebrews 5:8
- 1 Peter 2:21
- Matthew 5:9

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What troubles in the world right now feel “inescapable” to you, and how are you tempted to respond – ignore them, despair, or something else?
2. John wept because no one was worthy to open the scroll. What changes when you remember that the slain Lamb holds history?
3. The prayers of the saints are kept in golden bowls. Where have you stopped praying because it seemed to do no good?
4. How does the level ground around the throne challenge the way you see people of other races or cultures?
5. Who is weeping near you this week, and how could you weep with them?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt is Hope Chapel’s senior pastor. He and PJ have a daughter, and for twenty-five years or more he has met monthly with a group of Austin pastors. In the summer of 2020 he led Hope through outdoor worship and its first, limited return to indoor services, answering questions from the congregation after his sermons.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYHiclvSrwE&t=3618s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.