

2020



Diverse Excellencies

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Revelation 5:1-14

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So—what did you get for Christmas? Was it what you really *wanted*? Was it what you *always* wanted? Was it something you really *needed*?

It has been a crazy year on so many levels. Today is the last Sunday of the year—we're about to begin a new year this Friday. Let me ask this: What is it that you *need* as you enter a new year? I mean, at twelve midnight of January 1 of this year—if you were still up, you probably shouted, “Happy New Year!” You passed around kisses and hugs, blew your tiny kazoos, drank a toast to 2020 —and *look* what we got! Look at what we have had to go through and endure, look at how things have gone. Look at how much has changed!! This Thursday, at midnight, are you going to do the very same thing? “Happy New Year!!” Yes, it's all about good wishes to others. But, are we so sure? Will we say it with as much enthusiasm? Maybe. “Hope springs eternal,” I suppose. Maybe you think, “Well, it can't get any worse!!” Yeah, hopefully, but who knows?

So, what do we *really* need that doesn't come from any of the gifts we got, as wonderful as they are? I propose to each of you this prospect: we need to have a big view of God uppermost in our minds and hearts. We've always needed that, it's that important. But, after a year like this, going into a new year yet filled with so many uncertainties, we need a big God filling our minds, penetrating to the depths of our hearts, a big God that we can trust every day, every week, with every day, with everything, with the future—no matter how it goes, and especially if it continues to be difficult or worse. Because if we don't, this could be a make-or- break

year. Revelation 5 gives us a vision of a great, really big God, bigger than we could ever actually imagine or comprehend!! We need to know about this God, *really know*, and experience, this God.

I have had a long and deep appreciation for the writings of Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan theologian and pastor. Edwards has been referred to as the “great theologian of the glory of God.” He once delivered a sermon on this text in Revelation 5 (a sermon that, I’m guessing, probably took him about ninety minutes to deliver; you know, they didn’t have TV and movies and TikTok videos back then—much less of a problem with short attention spans...). I’m going to borrow from Edwards’ main points because it will give you a vision of a great—*glorious*—God, that, I hope, you will take and carry with you into a new year. In his sermon, Edwards talks about what he calls the “*diverse excellencies*” of Jesus Christ. Don’t you love that phrase, “*the diverse excellencies*”? We have in Jesus such characteristics that are seemingly polar opposites, that we find in no one else in the world. That’s what makes him, with the Father and the Spirit, so awesome, so great! To illustrate: Think of the human singing voice. Consider women, for example. Who doesn’t love the soprano voice, so high in pitch and expansive? To listen to a highly skilled soprano is marvelous. Some women are not sopranos, but altos instead, a bit deeper in tone, and broader. A song written for the alto voice is also just wonderful to hear. But then you put these “diverse female excellencies” together in a duet and wow, spectacular! With men, you have the tenor voice, also a bit higher in tone, clear, smooth—it’s marvelous; then you have

the bass: deep, resonant, so rich, moving to hear. When you put these two “diverse male excellencies” together in a duet, it’s fantastic! And so, we have women’s choruses and men’s choruses, each made up of their respective diverse excellencies—and who doesn’t love that? But, then, we have a choir, made up of women *and* men, sopranos *and* altos, tenors *and* basses—even broader “diverse excellencies”—and we’re blown away by these combined excellencies. Jesus is like a heavenly choir! There’s no one, nothing, like him!

Let’s look at the text in Revelation 5. The Apostle John sees a scroll in the right hand of God the Father, “sealed with seven seals,” the Biblical number of perfection, so it’s fully, completely sealed (Revelation 5:1). The scroll is God’s plans for the history of the world—past, present, and future. God is the God of history—nothing happens outside of His will. That in itself is worth remembering! But no one—no man, woman, or child, could be found to open it. None of the most powerful, the wealthiest, the smartest, the most talented, even the most virtuous or spiritual could open the scroll! Not a minister, a missionary, or a martyr! Not a creature, or even an angel, could be found able to open it. No one was found worthy of opening the scroll.

John “wept and wept.” He’s being persecuted, held captive on an island, looking for some good news! *Revelation* was written for a persecuted church. Yet news of the future of the world would remain locked-up—no one back then would ever know it! “Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep! See the *Lion* of the tribe of Judah, the

Root of David (Jesus!) has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals” (Revelation 5:5). So, John hears about a Lion! But, when he looks up, what does he see? Not a Lion.... But “Then I saw a *Lamb*...” (Revelation 5:6). Again, Jesus! But, no ordinary Lamb! “I saw a Lamb looking as if it had been slain.” It had to have wounds on its body, blood on its wool, but the Lamb wasn’t dead. “I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, *standing* in the center of the throne....” The slain Lamb was—Alive! And, again, not just an ordinary Lamb! John notes that the lamb “had seven horns,” symbolizing great, unsurpassable power, “and seven eyes,” giving it perfect, complete vision: Omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (all-seeing, all-knowing). John heard about a *lion* but he sees an incredible *lamb*!

John Piper also once did a sermon on this text. He makes the point that Jesus is a LAMB-like Lion and a LION-like Lamb. “Diverse Excellencies”—the very best of both! Jesus Christ is the lamb-like “Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David,” who “has triumphed” and the lion-like “Lamb, who was slain, standing in the center of the throne” who was able to open the scroll of the plans of God throughout history and into a glorious future. Jesus: a lamb-like lion and a lion-like lamb. In Jesus, and Jesus alone, do we find otherwise inconceivably “diverse *excellencies*.”

So, let’s go through each of them:

First: In Jesus, we find INFINITE HIGHNESS AND INFINITE CONDESCENSION.

He is higher than the heavens which he has made, higher than the angels, greater than all rulers and leaders of nations, “King of kings, and Lord of lords.” He is all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere present, unfathomable, incomprehensible, full of wisdom, who in Daniel 9, does as he pleases, whose authority and will no one can resist. And yet, in Philippians 2: “he did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped, but he made himself nothing”—infinite condescension—lower than the angels, God became a man, humbling himself, to be “Immanuel,” God *with* us, one of us, one with us, who wants to become our friend. Conceived in an unwed teen; born of two poor, teenaged parents; in tiny Bethlehem; in a stable because others got to the town and into the inns first; placed in a feed trough; visited first by lowly shepherds. In no other person do we see such greatness yet one who stooped so low.

Second: In Jesus is combined INFINITE GLORY AND LOWEST HUMILITY.

Divine: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). “About the Son,” it is said, “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom...; therefore, God, your God has set you above your companions...” (Hebrews 1:8) and yet, all because he “became obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8), the horrible, hated, God-cursed cross. “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we consider him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions,

he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53: 4-5). “Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place”—once again— “and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of the Father” (Philippians 2:10, 11). To the glory of the son who humbled himself.

Third: In Jesus we see combined INFINITE MAJESTY AND INFINITE MEEKNESS.

In Isaiah 6, when the seraphim called out to one another, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory,” that was also directed to Jesus. Psalm 45 is of Jesus: “*You* the most excellent of men and your lips have been anointed with grace, since God has blessed you forever. Your throne will last forever.” And yet, on earth, we are told, “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53: 2). For thirty of his years on earth, he was a carpenter, a businessman. Yet, this King said of himself, “I am meek and lowly of heart” (Matthew 11:29). “Blessed are the meek,” he said, “for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). We may find meekness in creatures, but in Jesus, meekness is *also* divine. He rode into Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey; he washed the dirty, stinky, feet of his disciples, Judas included. “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth” in his defense; “he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7), even though,

with a word, he could have called an army of angels to rescue him.

In no other person is there such a contrast of excellencies!! **Parents:** I would encourage you to read to your children *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis to give them, in part, this view of Jesus.

Fourth: In Jesus is combined INFINITE JUSTICE AND INFINITE GRACE.

He is “holy, holy, holy!” He hates sin—HATES it! We read: “You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions....” (Psalm 45:7). Think of how we hate lying, cheating, and mockery, and despise theft and injustice; how we loathe that which hurts and dehumanizes another—and we’re sinners, and sometimes we ourselves are guilty of these things in varying degrees. Jesus is perfect, and he’s God! When he comes again, he is disposed to punish sin. When we recite the Apostles Creed, we say that “he will come again to *judge* the living and the dead.” He will not acquit the unbelieving and the unrepentant; he can’t be bribed or bought off. When he returns as judge, the unbelieving, “will call to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb’” (Revelation 6:16). And yet, that does not have to be anyone’s fate if we will but repent and believe, for his name is “Jesus,” a name which means, “He will save his people from their sins.” The debt we could not pay, he paid by his death. He hated sin so much that he alone did what no one else could do. “Behold!” said

John the Baptist, “the Lamb of God who *takes away* the sin of the world!” The lion-like Lamb! At the cross, infinite justice and infinite mercy and grace meet in the person, in the body, and in the blood of Jesus. Talk about *diverse excellencies*! There is no other name under heaven or on earth by which we may be saved from our own sin.

Fifth: And so, in Jesus we find ALL PERFECTION AND GOOD; and yet, he was also PATIENT IN SUFFERING AND DEATH, which he did not deserve.

We suffer and die because we are sinful. Not so Jesus! He was harmless, innocent, but he was treated worse than a dangerous criminal. God told Adam and Eve that when you sin, you must die. But Jesus was fully innocent of any wrong-doing, and yet he died. He was willing. And still, he was even patient in death. II Corinthians 5:21 explains, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us”—a completely diverse reality— “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” —also, completely diverse. The great exchange! Because of one person—Jesus!

Sixth: In Jesus we witness both EQUALITY with God and REVERENCE for God.

On one hand, he said, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him” (John 14:7); “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:11); “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). He claimed to be God! Yet, while claiming to be God, he worshiped his Father, he prayed to his Father. John 17 is the real Lord’s Prayer! Every chance he had, as a

human being, he honored his Father in heaven to whom he was an equal.

Seventh: In Jesus we find SUPREME DOMINION and DEEPEST OBEDIENCE.

He performed miracles, proving that he had authority over nature. He healed sick bodies, he cured leprosy, he caused the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk. He raised the dead! He spoke, “Lazarus, come forth!” and the man stood up and walked out of his tomb. He had authority over demons, casting them out! In his miracles, he proved that he once was the Creator of the universe. Consider “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:1-3). He did not relinquish all of his authority; he was still supreme.

And yet, his was a life of obedience. No man has ever obeyed the Father so completely or so perfectly. “... I love the Father and... I do exactly what my Father has commanded” (John 14:31). Indeed, he “became obedient to death—even death on the cross” (Philippians 2:8). Jesus, in the moment of his greatest struggle, asks the Father to “take this cup of suffering and death” from him, yet what does he say? “But, not as I will, as you will” (Luke 22:42). Still, of his life and death he says, “The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again” (John 10:17). Yet he adds, “This command I received from

my Father” (John 10:18). Supreme Dominion and perfect Submission—both in one man!

Eighth: In Jesus we see ABSOLUTE SOVEREIGNTY and COMPLETE DEPENDENCE.

“For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth and under the earth. All things were made by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the beginning...so that in everything he might have the *supremacy*” (Colossians 1:16-18). His many miracles bear out this fact. Yet, in all things, he expressed full and complete dependence on his Father, like a Lamb. “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does, the Son also does” (John 5:19). “... I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me” (John 8:28). Sovereign Dependence/Dependent Sovereignty.

Ninth/Lastly: STILL further, in Jesus we see COMPLETE SELF-SUFFICIENCY and FULL TRUST.

Able to do anything he chooses, he was God—he needed nothing, no one. Yet, he was willing to be born a baby, entrusting himself for life and health itself to human parents and to his heavenly Father. He was willing to *die*, his choice, because he trusted his Father to bring him back to life. The religious leaders mocked him as he hung on the cross dying, shouting, “He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if He wants him...” (Matthew 27:43). They knew not how right they were! He did trust God, and three days later, the Father proved his trust by raising him from the dead. “When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered,

he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to Him who judges justly” (I Peter 2:23). “Into thy hands, I commit my spirit,” he said with some of his last breaths. And now, he is “able to open the scrolls of the plans of God”—as the Lamb who was slain but is standing—in triumph, because he trusted himself to his Father and he lives and reigns forever!

To Summarize —what we see in him that we find in no one else (according to John Piper):

1. We admire him for his transcendence because it is accompanied by the deepest form of condescension—no man has ever started higher and gone lower!
2. We admire him for his glory, but even more because it is mingled with the lowest humility.
3. We admire him for his great majesty, but even more because in his majesty is a transcendent meekness.
4. We admire him for his uncompromising justice because it is tempered by grace and mercy.
5. We admire him for his perfect goodness, but even more because he was patient in suffering and a death which he did not deserve.
6. We admire him because of his equality with God and yet even more by his expression of deepest reverence for God—to whom he was equal.
7. We admire him because of his supreme dominion but even more because it was clothed with a spirit of deep submission and obedience.
8. We admire him for his Absolute sovereignty, but even more because he made himself completely dependent on his Father by the power of the Spirit.

9. We admire him as completely self-sufficient God, but even more because, as a man, he placed his fullest trust in God.

He is a LAMB-LIKE LION and a LION-LIKE LAMB.

The scroll of history—past, present, and future—is in the right hand of Him who sits on the throne. The Right Hand of God is the hand of power and might and authority. The scroll has writing on both sides—it’s packed full of every detail. Nothing is overlooked. It’s all there—beginning to end. God could not entrust our lives, our future to another sinner or even to ourselves. *What do we know?* God the Father would not open the scroll without God the Son. Without the Son, for trampling into the dust of the glory of God the Father, we would be wiped out! In love a Holy God waits for and on the incarnate, once-dead, risen, ascended Son. The one to open the scroll had to be a lion, but a suffering lion; a triumphant lion who won in the face of obstacles, victorious against the enemy, who conquered, overcame, and prevailed through trial. He had to be a lamb, but a powerful lamb; a lamb who had been slaughtered, but who rose from the dead—and was *standing*—triumphant! You don’t entrust the future to anything that might rip it apart; you don’t entrust it to anything too weak—it had to be a lamb-like Lion and a lion-like Lamb! “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15).

In Revelation 6, six of the seven seals are opened. In Chapter 8, the seventh and last seal is opened. The rest of the book of Revelation is a slow unfolding of history, of cosmic

battles, of diabolical enemies—evil creatures and beasts and dragons, wicked men and women—who are defeated, cast down, cast out. And who is triumphing over them by the cross? Jesus, the Christ, the God-man, the lion and the lamb, the lamb-like lion and lion-like lamb, a God-man of “diverse excellencies”! That’s who we trust with our future.

You have heard it said: “We don’t know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future.” IF January 1 is to be your last January 1 on earth, if 2021 is the last year inscribed on your tombstone, it’s good to know that. If things in life are to get worse for us, that’s good to know. Revelation 2 and 3 was written to some weak churches and to some persecuted churches (5 out of 7 were weak, a couple worse than weak; I mean what does that tell you? 2 out of 7 were faithful!). Seven letters to seven churches. Jesus is speaking: he warned the weak churches to shape up or else, and he encouraged the persecuted Christians to stay faithful, to be unafraid, to endure patiently, to serve, to persevere in their work—because the message at the end of the book of *Revelation*, Chapters 21 and 22 is: “We win!” *True believers, the faithful, WIN!* “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:17).

Without Jesus, without belief in Jesus, or having belief but not fully knowing and fully experiencing Jesus, there is only what John experienced when he thought no one could be found to open the scroll of history: weeping—deep, deep, hopeless weeping. Misery. That’s not how we want to go

through life or face a new year.... We need in all of the things of life, and especially when life is difficult, a grand and glorious vision, of a great God, of Jesus Christ, who is like no other god invented by man, and like no other person who ever walked this earth.

Almost 70 years ago, a pastor by the name of J.B. Phillips wrote a book that he titled, *Your God is Too Small*. Here we are near the end of an eventful year, about to start a new year come Friday. The Chinese have a curse: “May you live in interesting times.” Well, these *are* interesting times, no doubt about it (that’s an understatement). It feels like a curse sometimes. But really, nothing could be worse than to have a god who, in our own mind, is far too small. The message of Revelation 5 is that the real God is great, and grand, and glorious. Jesus is most excellent: A God, a man, the God-man of *diverse and manifoldly marvelous excellencies*. He *is* worthy; *worthy* to be adored and worshiped!

Service ended with a video clip of choir singing “Worthy is the Lamb” from Handel’s *Messiah*.