

THE LAMB IS WORTHY


 9

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Revelation 5

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

They sing a new
song:

“You are worthy to
take the scroll

and to break its
seals,
for you were
slaughtered and
by your blood you
ransomed for God
saints from every
tribe and language
and people and
nation.” (Rev. 5:9)

Daily Bible Readings

M	Apr. 21	John 1:29–36	Here Is the Lamb of God!
T	Apr. 22	Ps. 118:1–14	The Lord Has Become My Salvation
W	Apr. 23	Ps. 118:15–29	Live and Not Die
Th	Apr. 24	1 Pet. 1:13–25	Worthy Ransom
F	Apr. 25	Ps. 99	Celebrate God
Sa	Apr. 26	Rev. 21:9–16, 21–27	Live in the Light

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Our expectations of the future shape the way we live in the present. The lives of expectant parents are turned upside down once they know that they will welcome an infant into their home. A terminally ill person’s expectation of what is beyond death can determine whether their final days are filled with despair or with hope. After the hard-fought battles of the D-Day landings in Normandy, which took place 70 years ago in June of 1944, the promise of victory gave people the courage and stamina to endure eleven more months of war.

The book of Revelation shapes our expectation for the future. It is a vision of what God has in store when creation has run its course. It doesn’t predict the particulars of what will happen, although people have tried in vain to decipher its symbolic language and the date the world will end. Those who secured the Normandy beaches had no idea precisely what the coming months held in store—there would be triumphs as well as crushing setbacks—yet they persevered in the hope of victory. Those of us who read about the victory of the Lamb don’t know precisely how or when God’s reign finally will be secured. What we do know is that it is assured.

All of this can seem far removed from our lives. Why should I be interested in cosmic forces and the end of history, especially if it’s not going to happen in my lifetime? The

answer is that the one who died for us is the one who holds the cosmic future in his hands. Blessed in the Lord, our works follow us. Our lives make a difference because Christ sweeps us into the story which ends in victory over the powers of sin and death.

Holy God, you hold the future in your hands. In Christ, the triumph of your reign of love and justice is assured. Give us faith to live in the confidence of his victory. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Revelation 5:1–10

5:1 Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals, ²and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” ³And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁴And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

⁶Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. ⁸When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

⁹They sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to break its seals,

for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for
God

saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;

¹⁰you have made them a kingdom and priests serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.”

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

THE VICTORY OF THE LAMB

The middle years of the first century CE were difficult for Jesus’ followers. They endured hostility from neighbors who were

suspicious of this new faith. From time to time, the Roman emperor persecuted them because they wouldn't worship him as a god. John, the author of Revelation, was exiled to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 1:9). While on Patmos, John received a vision from God intended for two audiences. The first were John's contemporaries. They would have understood many of the symbols John used as references to the enemies that threatened them. The message to these early Christians was that God would sustain them through their tribulations.

The other audience that Revelation addresses is the church through the ages. As we read the book, we see beyond the immediate struggles of the early Christians. The hope that sustained them is the same hope that upholds us as we confront the powers of sin and death in ourselves and in the powers and principalities of the universe.

In Revelation 5, we see the culmination of the ritual sacrifices that were practiced in ancient Israel. Levitical rituals called for animals such as lambs to be offered to reconcile God with the people. Sacrificial lambs were free from any blemishes, the best of the flock. In John's vision, Jesus is symbolized by a lamb, only this one is different from any animal that was ever presented at the tabernacle. Throughout the Bible, the number seven symbolizes perfection. This lamb has seven horns, signifying perfect power, and seven eyes, symbolizing perfect knowledge. The lamb was slain, like the lambs in the Hebrew Bible, but now the lamb is alive. Its sacrifice has proven it worthy to open the seven seals of the scroll that symbolizes the course of God's eternal design.

Our imaginations are asked to conceive of Jesus as two different images. Not only is he represented as a sacrificial lamb, but he is also a conquering lion, and not any lion but the Lion of Judah. This is the symbol of David, with whom God made a covenant promising that one of his descendants would reign forever. Jesus is the fulfillment of that covenant.

In the old covenant, the priests went through an elaborate ritual to purify themselves in order to be worthy of presiding over the sacrifice. They sprinkled some of the blood of the animals on the people to sanctify them. Now, Jesus' blood has made all who worship him a kingdom of priests.



How do you live differently knowing that the future is in the hands of the one who was slain?

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Humans want to know the future. Ancient Greeks journeyed to Delphi to consult soothsayers. Roman emperors used seers who examined bird entrails to predict the fortunes of the empire. Kings of ancient Israel employed court prophets to advise them about going into battle. We find fortune tellers who purport to read palms or interpret tarot cards. Insurance companies use complex mathematical models to calculate the probability of accidents, natural disasters, and premature death. They cannot definitively tell the fate of particular individuals, but they can give odds that help prepare for what the future holds.

Ultimately, however, the future is a mystery. This leads some people to give up on it altogether. They don't see what difference it makes in how they live, so their purpose in life is to get everything they can for themselves while they can. Others believe that the future belongs to us. If we have the willpower and work hard enough, we can control the future.

In his vision, John saw that the future belongs to God. It is symbolized by the scroll that was in the right hand of the one seated on the throne. But the scroll was perfectly closed with seven seals. No one in all creation was worthy of breaking the seals and setting in motion the course of events that would lead to the fulfillment of God's purpose for creation. Only Jesus, the Lion of Judah, who is the lamb that was slain, was worthy.

That unfolding of history is not something removed from our experience. It's something in which we all have an interest. If you read the news, it seems like humanity is in an endless cycle of wars, famines, natural disasters, and other calamities. The perfect sacrifice of the lamb has freed us from despair and given us hope of God's perfect reign. On a personal level, the things we suffer—from broken relationships to debilitating injuries to the afflictions of aging—don't define who we are because Jesus' perfect sacrifice frees us from their power and lifts us to the presence of the living God.

As history unfolds, we are not bystanders. Jesus has made us a kingdom of priests. Priests are God's representatives. Whatever we suffer, no matter how hopeless the world looks, the future belongs to God. And God works through us, God's servants, to fulfill God's purpose.



How is God using your community of faith to fulfill God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Our worship, at its best, is a rehearsal for what God has in store. Revelation describes the faithful who complete their earthly journey surrounding the throne of God where they continually sing praise. Notice how important music is in that heavenly worship.

There's something about music that touches the depths of our souls. When dementia erases precious memories from a loved one, that person often joins in singing favorite hymns. When a sports team scores, fans express their joy by erupting into the team's fight song. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Americans of every political persuasion showed unity by singing "God Bless America." In singing, we can express our deepest sentiments. Singing opens paths in our spirit that let us feel God's Spirit moving within us.

There is great value in singing songs of praise and participating in orders of worship that are familiar. They help us relive times when we have felt the Spirit. Knowing what to expect, we're not distracted by having to learn something new. However, Revelation depicts people from every nation and tribe gathered around the throne. Each one in that "sacred throng" brings their particular praises. As we practice for heaven, it is good for us to expand our repertoire of music and worship styles. As we grow in our appreciation of how others worship, we acquire new ways to express our praise and to be aware of God in our midst.

Revelation is concerned that we worship the one who is worthy of our praise. The vision was given to people who were persecuted because they did not give primary allegiance to Rome. Many congregations today wrestle with the question of whether their national flag, to which they pledge allegiance, has a place in the space where they worship the God of every nation.

It's tempting to get distracted by the symbolic language of Revelation. Early Christians understood the images as correlating to their situation. But the symbolic language transcends the first century. It speaks to any and all times, assuring us that no matter how things look, God remains sovereign. We rob Revelation of its power and have a limited understanding of God if we try to read the symbols as applying only to our time, as if God has hidden them from all other Christians throughout history.



How does the affirmation that only God and the Lamb are worthy of allegiance and worship challenge your loyalties?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. This apocalypse (revelation) describes the vision of John of Patmos. In this chapter, the vision focuses on a scroll sealed with seven seals.
2. The contents of the scroll are thought to be God's ultimate plan for the world. It is thus a mystery that can only come to be known through divine revelation.
3. The seven seals indicate that only a person invested with full authority could break the seals and unfurl the scroll. Jesus, as the Messiah and Son of God, is the one to possess such authority.
4. The image of the lion is strikingly paired with the image of the "Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered." The lion and the lamb are the same, indicating the nature of Jesus' messiahship: he is a messiah who, like the Passover lamb, becomes a sacrifice for others.
5. Those present worship the Lamb and are moved to sing "a new song," the contents of which suggest that those who worship the sacrificial lamb are to live lives that emulate him. They are to be "a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth." Presumably, their reign will be in Christlike service to others.