

The Lamb Is Worthy

Devotional Reading: Psalm 118:15-29

Background Scripture: Revelation 5

Revelation 5:1-10

¹ Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" ³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. ⁴ I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. ⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

⁶ Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out

into all the earth. ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for
God

persons 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."

Key Text

They sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation."

—Revelation 5:9

Costly Sacrifices

Unit 2: Christ's All-Sufficient Sacrifice

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the Lion, the Root, and the Lamb.
2. Explain the significance of each of those three designations.
3. Participate with classmates in writing lyrics for a new song of praise.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

A. What Is Worth?

B. Lesson Context

I. Who Is Worthy? (Revelation 5:1-4)

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B. Checking Candidates (vv. 2-4)

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II. Christ Is Worthy (Revelation 5:5-10)

A. Lion and Root (v. 5)

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B. Slain Lamb (v. 6)

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B. Prayer

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Introduction

A. What Is Worth?

People have very different ideas about what makes someone worthy of honor. In modern cultures, a person's worthiness for various honors often seems to be based on the person's wealth, success, or popularity in the public eye.

My friend Joe does not fit this model of a worthy person. Joe works as a mid-level manager of a small company that makes medical equipment. By some standards, Joe is not rich. In the eyes of the world, his life is simple and unremarkable. But Joe has a wife and four children whom he loves dearly. He goes to work every day and works hard in a thankless profession to provide for his family. His wife and children never go without, even though Joe often does. He models self-sacrificial love daily. Were you offered a choice between being a famous but self-serving person or being unknown but self-sacrificial, whom do you think God would consider more worthy of honor?

B. Lesson Context

Revelation 4 and 5 narrate the apostle John's vision of the divine throne room. This vision immediately follows the appearance of "someone like a son of man" (Revelation 1:13; compare Daniel 7:13), who dictates letters to seven churches in the province of Asia Minor. These letters offered both encouragement and caution to churches that ranged from being faithful to unfaithful.

Two good questions to ask in many life situations are "What's so?" and "So what?" In answer to the first question, Revelation 1–3 establishes the facts regarding the status of seven churches; in answer to the second question, the visions of Revelation 4 and following describe rewards and consequences. This allows us to see God's authority and power, the reality that he remains in charge even when earthly events would suggest otherwise (compare Psalm 47:8).

John's visions begin in Revelation 4:1 with a glimpse of God in his throne room (compare Isaiah 6:1). This is the location of the true and ulti-

mate ruler of the universe. While “in the Spirit” (Revelation 4:2), John witnesses startling and glorious things: precious stones, elders with crowns, fiery lamps, creatures who worship God day and night, etc. After this broad look around the throne room, John’s vision zooms in to focus on a specific object.

I. Who Is Worthy?

(Revelation 5:1-4)

A. Sealed Scroll (v. 1)

1. Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.

A *scroll* is typically made from flattened papyrus or animal skins and is opened and closed by being unrolled and rolled (Revelation 6:14).

The description of the document as having *writing on both sides* witnesses to its unusual nature. Most scrolls were written on only one side, but lengthy documents could take up both sides. The fact that this scroll has writing on it front and back signals its contents’ breadth, depth, or both (compare Ezekiel 2:9-10).

Naturally, we are curious about the scroll’s contents, and various proposals have been offered. However, the focus of Revelation 5 is not on the scroll’s contents but on the fact that it is *sealed with seven seals*. Scrolls were the common medium in the ancient world for important documents. These were often sealed to prevent someone from reading or tampering with their contents. A seal in this context would normally consist of hot wax poured over threads that tied the scroll in its rolled-up state. Legal documents would have several seals, indicating several witnesses. These witnesses often used a signet ring to press into the wax for self-identification. This made it impossible to open the scroll without detection of tampering. Many students believe that the number *seven* stands for “perfection” or “completeness,” based on how it is used elsewhere in the Bible (compare Revelation 15:1, 8).

B. Checking Candidates (vv. 2-4)

2. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in

a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?”

The dramatic action in the rest of this scene is set up by this proclamation of a *mighty angel*, who is unnamed (compare Revelation 10:1). The use of the word *worthy* makes his question not so much an open invitation as it is a rhetorical challenge. The term *worthy* in this context encompasses not just moral excellence but also signifies someone who possesses the authority and power to break the seals.

What Do You Think?

What has to happen for you to live a “worthy” life?

Digging Deeper

How do Ephesians 4:1; Colossians 1:10; etc. inform your answer?

3. But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.

The search for someone worthy seems at first to fail. The mention of *heaven*, *earth*, and *under the earth* was a typical method of depicting the domains of heavenly beings, earthly beings, and the world of the deceased (compare Exodus 20:4, 11; Psalm 146:6). But to focus on the scientific nature of each of the three locations is to miss the bigger picture. That bigger picture is “anywhere you can think of.” This description, therefore, highlights the entirety of the cosmos, as it does in Philippians 2:10. Every part of creation has been explored, and no one qualified has been found—yet.

4. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.

People are described as weeping in many places in the Bible. But *wept and wept* is an intense form of grief. The ancient Greek words translated as such are found elsewhere in the New Testament only at Matthew 2:18; Mark 5:38; and Philippians 3:18. The sense can be one of the duration of the weeping or depth of distress or both (compare Genesis 46:29; Judges 20:23; Ezra 3:12; 10:1).

One theory that might explain John's reaction concerns what he was told at the beginning of the throne-room scene. There, he was told that future events would be revealed to him (Revelation 4:1). But now, in the verse before us, John's expectations become frustrated. If John connects the scroll's contents with knowledge of future events and no one can open the scroll, then the promise will not be fulfilled. Even he, John, was not *worthy to open the scroll or look inside*. John's weeping is consistent with what he knows and doesn't know. But that is about to change.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways that Jesus would want you to react to the sorrows of life?

Digging Deeper

Are specific cases such as Jeremiah 22:10 and Ezekiel 24:15-18 relevant to this question? Why, or why not?

Feeling Helpless

At one time, I despised plumbing work. I loathed it, dreaded it, and would rather do any other sort of home repair than plumbing. But, since plumbing work by a professional wasn't in my budget as a new homeowner, I had little choice but to attempt to fix things myself. And something was always leaking in our old house built in the 1920s. The fact that the plumbing was complicated by mixtures of PVC, iron, and copper pipes drove me toward despair.

We feel helpless when we try to bring a challenging situation under control but we lack the skill, means, or qualifications to do so and nobody else is available to call on. That was the apostle John's situation.

But remember: Revelation 5:4 is not the end of the story! We are often in grief and in pain because of a situation we can't control or remedy. When that happens, remember that the One who came to solve our greatest problem is available to strengthen us. How often must you hit rock bottom before you call on his strength?

—C. S.

II. Christ Is Worthy

(Revelation 5:5-10)

A. Lion and Root (v. 5)

5. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

John is comforted by *one of the 24 elders* present around God's throne (Revelation 4:4, 10). Someone is indeed worthy, the elder claims, and he refers to this person with two important designations.

The first designation, *the Lion of the tribe of Judah*, comes from Genesis 49:9-10, where Jacob refers to his son Judah as a "lion's cub" and compares him to a lion that no one dares rouse. This metaphor is immediately followed by the promise that Judah will always have the right of rulership.

The other designation, *the Root of David*, confirms that the Messiah is in view. This description comes from Isaiah 11:1, 10, another text viewed as a prophecy about the coming Messiah. The specific title in Isaiah 11:10 is "the Root of Jesse" (Jesse having been the father of David). Isaiah prophesied how the Messiah will bring justice and peace to the earth and unity to the nations. The designation "the Root and the Offspring of David" is explicitly claimed by Jesus near the book's end (Revelation 22:16).

The one who is both Lion and Root has the right to open the scroll because he has "triumphed." The narrative doesn't tell us at this point what that victory is, but the coupling of this word with the imagery of the regal lion implies a conquering king. The reader expects someone as mighty as a lion to enter the scene.

Regarding Credentials

Credentials can be a funny thing. To be approved for a specific task, you may need credentials that say you're qualified. But how do you get qualified without being given a chance to do similar work?

This kind of circular trap doesn't apply to opening the sealed scroll. It wasn't a question of credentials or prior experience at breaking wax

seals that was the issue. Rather, the issue was one of credentials in terms of *authorization*. Only Christ had the proper credentials, the authorization, to open the sealed scroll. His credentials included his birthright as the Lion from the tribe of Judah and the Root of David. But it was his action of laying down his life that completed his credentials as the only one qualified to open the scroll.

What about your credentials as a spiritually mature Christian? Have you moved from the “milk” needed by a spiritual infant to the “solid food” of God’s Word that is the spiritual diet of the mature (1 Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12-14)? Do you desire spiritual maturity as much as Christ desires it for you? —C. S.

B. Slain Lamb (v. 6)

6a. Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.

The reader first encounters *the four living creatures* and *the elders* in Revelation 4:4-6. The word *creatures* implies that these beings are neither humans nor angels. In the book of Revelation, the number “four” is symbolic of the entirety of the earth and its inhabitants (compare 7:1). Combining that observation with the creatures’ multitudes of eyes (4:8) indicates that they are watching the entire earth; nothing is hidden from them. This symbolizes the all-knowing nature of the Lord, his omniscience (compare Hebrews 4:13).

If the original readers expected any particular animal to appear in addition to the four beasts, it would likely be a lion, per the previous verse. To the readers’ likely surprise, however, the spotlight focuses on *a Lamb*. This is a startling plot twist, especially given the Lamb’s outward appearance. It bears the marks of having *been slain*, yet it lives, given that it is standing. A metaphor is used here to represent Christ, who was killed but resurrected. The image of the slain Lamb recalls the Old Testament’s concept of blood sacrifice, yet the Lamb in John’s vision didn’t remain dead; it is depicted as alive, bear-

ing visible, serious wounds (compare Isaiah 53:7; John 20:24-29; Revelation 13:8). The New Testament uses the capitalized word *Lamb* or *Lamb’s* some 35 times, and all but two of those are in the book of Revelation.

What Do You Think?

How would you explain to an unbeliever the meaning and significance of the images of Jesus as the Lion, a Lamb, and the Root?

Digging Deeper

Which of those three images do you find the most difficult to grasp? Why?

6b. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

The description of the Lamb combines the number *seven* (symbolizing perfection or completeness; see commentary on Revelation 5:1, above) with *horns* (symbolizing power per Psalm 132:17; Ezekiel 29:21; Daniel 7:7-24; 8:3-22) and *eyes* (symbolizing divine knowledge per 2 Chronicles 16:9; Zechariah 4:10). The exact meaning of the *seven spirits of God* is difficult to determine (compare and contrast Revelation 1:4; 4:5). Some students take this phrase to be the same as the sevenfold Spirit depicted in Isaiah 11:2-3; this viewpoint allows a reference to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

Another viewpoint understands the seven spirits to refer to God’s seven angels of Revelation 8:2, 6; 15:1; etc. Some ancient Jewish texts mention seven archangels that stand before God’s throne. The nonbiblical Tobit 12:15, for example, speaks of “Raphael, one of the seven holy angels” who presents the saints’ prayers and stands before the glory of God.

Translators have to make a choice here: to

How to Say It

Judah	Joo-duh.
Laodicea	Lay-odd-uh-see-uh.
Messiah	Meh-sigh-uh.
omniscience	ahm-nish-untz.

translate as lower-case *spirits* rather than upper-case *Spirits* reveals a belief that this does not refer to deity; that is the choice made by the translators of the *New International Version*.

In either case, the fact that these Spirits or spirits serve the Lamb's purpose shows his power and authority.

C. Praise to the Lamb (vv. 7-10)

7. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.

The Lamb demonstrates his worthiness by receiving the scroll *from the right hand of him who sat on the throne*. All present, including John, undoubtedly watch in amazement as the Lamb does this audacious thing! However, this is not an act of thievery or usurpation, for God has been waiting for the Lamb. The scroll and its contents belong to the Lamb.

8a. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb.

With the transfer of the scroll, worship in Heaven resumes. But now *the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders bow before the Lamb*. This is not to recognize a transfer of power that diminishes the authority of the one on the throne. Rather, it recognizes the Lamb's authority and his unity with the one on the throne.

The number of elders, 24, is double the number 12, which may represent the people of God from both the Old and New Testaments. Israel, the covenant people of the Old Testament era, was comprised of 12 tribes (Exodus 24:4; compare Revelation 21:12). Christians, the covenant people of the New Testament era, are linked with the 12 apostles (Luke 6:13; compare Revelation 21:14), who are the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). Jesus himself combines the idea of 12 tribes with 12 apostles in his description of the future (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30).

8b. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

Following the transfer of the scroll, new details unfold before John's eyes. The elders each now have *a harp*, which they presumably use for wor-

ship music, given that harps were common as instruments of worship (Psalms 33:2; 71:22; 147:7; etc.). Harps are also mentioned in Revelation 14:2; 15:2.

The fact that the elders also hold *golden bowls full of incense* offers the reader a rarity in the book of Revelation: the two words *which are*. These two words indicate that an explanation of the symbolism comes next. In several passages, the "which are/is" language explains symbolism with more symbolism (example: Revelation 5:6). But that isn't the case here, given the unambiguous identification of *the prayers of God's people*. The context implies that the Lamb receives those prayers; he doesn't ignore them.

9a. And they sang a new song,

Worship of the Lamb includes singing. What the elders sing is not an old favorite but *a new song*. This imperative is stressed throughout the Psalter (Psalms 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1). Revelation 14:3 is an additional implementation (compare Isaiah 42:10). However, in that instance, it's the 144,000 redeemed who are singing while the four beasts and the elders (apparently) listen.

What Do You Think?

How often should the church introduce new songs in worship services? Why?

Digging Deeper

What would nudge you toward being more open to learning a new song?

9b. saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God

The reality that the Lamb had been slain would have been perceived as a source of embarrassment by many. But the heavenly court praises the Lamb not in spite of his death but because of it. Christ's obedient death is humanity's victory over sin-guilt (Romans 3:25-26). The Lamb's unique obedience to the Father made him worthy to take the book and *open its seals*.

The heavenly court then explains the implications of that death further. Primary is the truth that it *purchased us for God*. The verb translated

“purchase” occurs about 30 times in the New Testament; it always refers to a purchase that involves an exchange (examples: Matthew 13:44, 46; John 13:29). Such purchases can refer to paying a price to free someone (examples: 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23), and that’s the sense here.

9c. “persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.”

The song now recognizes the diverse nature of those who have been redeemed. The diversity is fourfold in that they come from every family group (*tribe*), every *language* group, every demographic (*people*), and every ethnic group (*nation*). This heavenly mix is drawn from the entire world.

10a. “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,”

This half-verse yields three minor problems regarding the original author’s words per the various Greek manuscripts. The first challenge concerns the word *them*. In some manuscripts, it’s the Greek word translated “us” instead. This may have been a scribe’s intent to match that word to the diverse group in Revelation 5:9c, just studied.

The second minor challenge is that the phrase *our God* appears in only some manuscripts. The third challenge is that some manuscripts have the Greek word for *kings* instead of *kingdom*. Revelation 1:6 also has “kings” instead of “kingdom” in a manuscript variant, so that’s evidence for the word *kings*. However, Exodus 19:6 speaks of “a kingdom

of priests,” which seems to be the antecedent or pattern for the issue. In any case, we will be treated like royalty when God’s kingdom is manifested in its fullest; note the golden crowns the elders wear in Revelation 4:4!

Offering certain parallels and directions to the half-verse before us are Isaiah 61:6; 1 Peter 2:5, 9; and Revelation 20:6.

What Do You Think?

What ways will you live as a priest of God in the week ahead?

Digging Deeper

In addition to 1 Peter 2:5, what passages encourage you to do so?

10b. “and they will reign on the earth.”

To serve as a royal priesthood comes with a promise: God’s people will one day *reign on the earth*. Christ made this promise explicitly in the letter to the church of Laodicea (Revelation 3:21), and it appears elsewhere in the New Testament as well (2 Timothy 2:12). This is an astonishing and humbling responsibility (compare Luke 19:17).

Conclusion

A. Jesus Is Worthy

The answer to the question *What makes a person worthy of honor?* depends greatly on who is bestowing the honor. In God’s economy, earthly success does not draw his praise. Ultimately, Jesus alone is worthy of all glory and honor. He alone is worthy to unbind the scroll. While Jesus will always reign supreme, we will be honored by being called to reign with him. But our worthiness will be tested! Expect it.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, orient our hearts to the things that you value, not the things the world values. Teach us to live self-sacrificially as Jesus did. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

B. Thought to Remember

Jesus alone is worthy of all honor and praise.



Visual for Lesson 9. Display this visual as you discuss the lesson commentary associated with Revelation 5:9.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

As learners arrive, have the following written on the board:

Life is like . . .

- *riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving.*
- *a game of chess. Always think before you make a move.*
- *a cactus. It's beautiful but thorny.*

Poll learners to see which of the three “Life is like . . .” completions most closely matches their experiences. Discuss.

Alternative. Distribute slips of paper from the “It’s Kind of Like . . .” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Invite participants to take no more than one minute to turn their statement into a “_____ is like” analogy.

After either of the above, say, “Some things are nearly impossible to describe by using a pithy analogy or metaphor. We call such things ‘inexpressible’ or ‘indescribable.’ Today’s lesson allows us to consider how the apostle John wrestled with an experience almost beyond his understanding.”

Into the Word

Ensure that participants comprehend that Revelation 4 is the necessary context or preamble to today’s text from Revelation 5. To do so, distribute handouts (you create) with the references *Revelation 4* and *Revelation 5:1-10* as headers of two columns, one each. Have printed down the left side the words or phrases *throne, seven, elders, living creatures, and worthy* as labels to five rows, one each. Have printed these instructions on the handout: “As we come to each word in Revelation 5:1-10, write the verse where the word occurs in that text and in Revelation 4. Make your entries where the appropriate column and row intersect.”

In the lower half of the handout, have printed *New to Me, Comforting to Me, and Disturbing to*

Me as headers to three columns, one each. Have learners make entries under the appropriate header as you progress through Revelation 5:1-10.

Form learners into study triads. Have triads discuss among themselves Revelation 5:1-4 and make entries to the top and bottom halves of their handout. When triads seem finished, reconvene for a whole-class discussion of insights.

Repeat this procedure for Revelation 5:5-7, but have triads also consider imagery in the text as drawn from Genesis 49:8-10 (lion); Isaiah 11:1, 10 (root); Isaiah 53:7-8 and John 1:29, 36 (lamb). When triads seem finished, reconvene for a whole-class discussion of insights. *Option:* Depending on the nature of your class, you might choose to focus the attention of the triads on (1) what the prophecies say, (2) how we know they are about Jesus, and (3) how Jesus did or will fulfill them all.

Repeat the basic procedure of Revelation 5:1-4, above, for Revelation 5:8-10. *Option:* Have triads dig deeper by considering (1) the significance of the number 12 as informed by Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30; and Revelation 21:12-14; as well as (2) the disposition of the “prayers of all God’s people” as informed by Revelation 8:3-4.

Into Life

Say, “In the spirit of the ‘new song’ of Revelation 5:9, let’s write one!” Form groups for writing a couple of lines of lyrics for a new song of praise.

Alternative 1. Distribute instead copies of “The Worthy Lamb” exercise from the activity page to be completed as indicated.

Alternative 2. Have your class sing a new song by taking the lyrics of an existing song and singing it to the tune of another song. (Ensure that the two existing songs have the same meter, as noted in the index to many hymnals.) For example, the words to “All the Way My Savior Leads Me” can be sung to the tune of “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” and vice versa.