

November 7 Lesson 10 (NIV)

UNITED IN PRAISE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Revelation 7:9–17

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Revelation 7:9–17

REVELATION 7:9–17

⁹ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying:

“Amen!
Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!”

¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”

¹⁴ I answered, “Sir, you know.”

And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore,

“they are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne
will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ ‘Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat down on them,’

nor any scorching heat.
¹⁷ 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.' "

KEY TEXT

I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.—
Revelation 7:14

CELEBRATING GOD

Unit 3: Visions of Praise

LESSONS 10–13

LESSON OUTLINE

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- B. Prayer
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HOW TO SAY IT

apocalypticuh-paw-kuh-lip-tik.

Gentiles *Jen*-tiles.

Maccabees *Mack*-uh-bees.

Sardis *Sar*-dis.

tabernacle *tah*-burr-*nah*-kulz.

Zechariah *Zek*-uh-*rye*-uh.

Introduction

A. Diverse Harmony

Omonia Church of Christ in Athens, Greece, has developed a reputation for being diverse and harmonious. Greek, Arabic, Farsi, Russian, Bulgarian, Albanian, and Filipino are frequently spoken in the church. Some in attendance don headsets to hear worship services translated.

Omonia believes their diverse worship is not limited to times of formal services. The church started a ministry to serve refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. Victims displaced by war, violence, and oppression experience the love of Christ because of Omonia.

Appropriately, *omonia* means “harmony” in Greek; the word appears in the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) in Psalm 55:14, in a context of remembered (but lost) fellowship. Different Greek words are used in the New Testament to convey this concept (see Philippians 1:27; 2:2; 1 Peter 3:8). One of those words is the source of our English word *symphony* (2 Corinthians 6:15). Like the wide range of instruments in a symphony orchestra, the diverse congregation of Omonia produces a beautifully unified harmony of worship and service to God. Omonia demonstrates the future realities of Revelation 7, today’s text, in the here and now.

B. Lesson Context

Some Christians believe the book of Revelation speaks only of the future. Others believe the book speaks in coded language about the people and events of the first century AD. Still others believe the book is figurative or symbolic, using vivid imagery to teach spiritual lessons. Then there’s the issue of separate approaches to sections consisting of chapters 1–3; 4–19, and 20–22!

No matter the interpretive perspective, three things should be observed by careful readers. First, Revelation combines elements of ancient letters, prophetic texts, and apocalyptic literature. It is considered partially a letter because of how the book opens with a greeting (Revelation 1:4–7) and is addressed to specific churches (see chapters 2 and 3). Revelation is considered a form of prophecy (1:3), given to John in order that he might declare the “testimony of Jesus Christ” (1:9). Revelation is also considered an apocalyptic text. During the era in which John recorded his revelation, apocalyptic texts were commonplace. This was a highly stylized type of literature written to unveil God’s plan for the world, both in the past and for the future.

Apocalyptic literature often presents this plan through vivid and cryptic imagery. A proper understanding of Revelation requires recognizing the imagery and language of apocalyptic literature (compare Matthew 24:29–31; Mark 13:24–27; Luke 21:25–28).

Second, the book of Revelation is loaded with allusions to the Old Testament and assumes the audience’s familiarity with their source (compare Isaiah 6:1–3; Ezekiel 1:18, 22, 26–28; and Revelation 4). Revelation rests on the shoulders of Genesis (Genesis 1:1; see Revelation 21:1), Exodus (Exodus 19:6; see Revelation 1:5–6), Daniel (Daniel 7:13; see Revelation 1:7, 13; 14:14), and even Psalms (Psalm 2:9; see Revelation 2:27; 12:5; 19:15). The fullest understanding of Revelation recognizes its roots in the Old Testament.

Third, Revelation emphasizes worshipping God. The text is filled with poetic scenes of worship (see Revelation 4:8; 5:9–13; 7:10–17; 11:15–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 19:1–8). Each one makes claims about who is worthy to be worshipped in Heaven and on earth. Revelation calls the people to worship “our God, who sits on the throne” and “the Lamb” (7:10, below).

Today’s passage continues John’s vision of Heaven. Several startling events have occurred: the glorious entry of the Lamb into the throne room (Revelation 5:6) and the introduction of a sealed scroll and its opening (5:1; 6:1–17), leading to the dramatic gathering of the servants of God (7:1–8). John then turned his attention to the great multitude of people and witnessed their worship.

I. Uncountable Crowd

(REVELATION 7:9–10)

A. Every People Group Present (v. 9)

9a. After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count,

We are given the impression this *great multitude* is far bigger than the large but countable number of those from Israel’s tribes that John had just witnessed (Revelation 7:4–8). John’s vision is similar to Daniel’s vision of a throne room, where a crowd of “ten thousand times ten thousand” stands before the “Ancient of Days” (Daniel 7:9–10). This is not a mathematical formula but a way of saying this group is uncountable.

9b. from every nation, tribe, people and language,

The nature of this vast group is explained in the four ways seen here. The cumulative effect is to show that it is universally representative of all humanity. First, it includes people from *every nation*. This is the word for a national group, a political entity. It is also the word sometimes translated “Gentiles” when referring to any nation that is not Israel (Revelation 11:2).

One’s *tribe* implies sharing ancestral bloodlines, as in the tribes of Israel (example: Revelation 7:4–8). Tribes transcend national borders. For example, a person’s genetic “tribe” might be Irish, but this does not mean that person lives in Ireland.

A *people* is a group bound together by cultural identity. They would share many cultural markers that might transcend national or ethnic boundaries. One such marker may be their *language*. By one estimate, there are 6,500 distinct languages on earth today. There may have been a similar number in John’s day. Languages are not confined to regional or national

boundaries; they cross borders and can transcend political identities (see Acts 2:5–11; Revelation 13:7).

9c. standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes

The previous description reflects the worldwide penetration of the gospel. Regardless of one's heritage or cultural context of origin, any person can believe and share in God's salvation. The image of *wearing white robes* means that the person is cleansed from sin (Revelation 7:14).

The message to the church in Sardis commended those who had not soiled their garments (with sin) but instead had walked with Christ in white, "for they are worthy" (Revelation 3:4–5). Further, white robes are given as a reward to the martyrs of the church, those who have maintained their faith and witness even unto death (6:9–11).

9d. and were holding palm branches in their hands.

Use of *palm branches* reflects a practice of worship that began with the Festival of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33–36a, 39–43). This annual observance celebrated Israel's liberation from Egypt and God's faithfulness to his people during a time of need. The people were to "take branches from luxuriant trees—from palms ... and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days" (23:40).

The practice of associating palm branches with an event of victorious joy continued into the time between the Old and New Testaments (see the nonbiblical 1 Maccabees 13:51 regarding an incident of 141 BC). In the New Testament, crowds waved palm branches while shouting "Hosanna" (which means "save") during Jesus' triumphal entry (see John 12:13). The multitudes in John's vision stand in worship before the Lamb, who has indeed saved them (next verse).

B. Every Voice Lifting Praise (v. 10)

10. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

The multitude acknowledges that their hope of *salvation* is realized. This implies God's victory over his enemies and deliverance for his people (see Revelation 12:10; 19:1). It is not any fictitious god that is being described, only *our God*. This also emphasizes the personal nature of God. His relationship with his people is fully demonstrated. The means of this deliverance is seen also in their worship of *the Lamb* (Revelation 5:13). Christ's death and resurrection as the Lamb of God (see John 1:29) enacts God's salvation.

II. Worshipful Circle

(REVELATION 7:11–12)

A. Acts of Worship (v. 11)

11. All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

The inner circle *around the throne* becomes the focus again (see Revelation 4:4, 6; 5:11). Their acts of worship involve their whole bodies. As they fall to their knees, their faces touch the ground, presumably in full view of the great multitude that worships by joyously waving palms.

B. Words of Acclamation (v. 12)

12a. saying: “Amen!”

Saying could imply more than words merely spoken. As the words of worship from the inner circle are spoken in unison and have the structure of an ancient hymn, it is possible that these words were meant to be chanted or recited.

Those in the inner circle of worshippers voice their worship in powerful words directed to God for eternity. Similar worship is directed to the Lamb in the throne room (see Revelation 5:11–12).

The worship described here is bracketed on both sides with *Amen*, a Greek transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning “it is true.” The word’s usage by the worshippers recognizes and affirms what follows next.

12b. Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength

The first word of pronouncement of those around the throne is justified because they have experienced the Lord’s goodness. *Glory* carries the image of being full of light—radiant like celestial bodies (see 1 Corinthians 15:41). The glory of the Lord sometimes accompanies heavenly manifestations (Luke 2:9). A characteristic of God’s presence in the tabernacle or the temple was a display of his glory (Exodus 40:34; compare Revelation 15:8).

The Bible often places *wisdom* in parallel with knowledge (example: Proverbs 14:6). God has absolute knowledge. He has determined what is right and wrong. God always does the right thing, having never-failing wisdom.

When recognizing God’s salvation, a response of giving *thanks* is appropriate. It is an expression of gratitude to God for his care and his provision. *Honor* offers esteem for a person, based on the person’s character and acts. God is worthy of ultimate honor for his great providential works of salvation and simply because he is God.

The word *power* is used frequently throughout the book of Revelation. It is tied to God’s acts of creating and sustaining the universe (Revelation 4:11) and God’s rule over the entire earth (11:17). It is impossible to imagine any greater power! The all-powerful one who created the universe also provides deliverance for his people. Related to power, *strength* describes the characteristic of a very strong person. As applied to God, this may be beyond our understanding. But we can say that God’s strength is inexhaustible and without limits.

12c. Be to our God for ever and ever.

This hymn ends on an important note that calls for the seven ascriptions to be recognized *for ever and ever*. This acknowledges the eternal nature of *God*. Even our best descriptions of his nature fail to account for the eternality of God—the one without beginning or end.

12d. Amen!”

The repetition of *Amen* brings a solemn sense of affirmation to these words of worship.

III. White-Robed Witnesses (REVELATION 7:13–17)

A. Robes Washed in Blood (vv. 13–14)

13. Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”

In the midst of this worshipful vision, John is approached with a question from *one of the elders*. Prophetic literature is filled with examples of questions used as a method of teaching (example: Zechariah 4:2–6). The elder’s question has the effect of asking, “Do you know the who, what, where, when, why, and how of what you see?”

14. I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Whether out of respect or because of uncertainty, John allows the elder to answer his own question. In response, the elder points to two aspects of those in white robes. Regarding their emergence from *great tribulation*, we recall that Christians experience suffering and trials of body and faith. Jesus warned his followers that trouble and persecution were to be expected (Matthew 5:10–11; John 16:33; compare 2 Timothy 3:12).

To the audience of Revelation, this tribulation could have been related to persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. To modern readers, this could also imply a future time of widespread suffering and persecution. For both ancient and modern audiences, John’s vision affirms that following Jesus might result in suffering, even to the point of martyrdom.

Second, the *robes* have not always been *white*; they are so because they have been *washed ... in the blood of the Lamb*. What the elder describes is not some sort of illusion; dipping a dirty garment in a red liquid and pulling it out as pure white is not a magic trick of chemical properties. Rather, the drama represents Christ’s atonement and our forgiveness from sin based on his sacrificial death (see Hebrews 9:28; 1 John 1:7). The blood of the Lamb triumphs over sin and Satan (see Revelation 12:9–11). It is the fulfillment of John’s earlier record of the words of John the Baptist: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). These words provide hope to suffering audiences of any era.

B. Servants Protected from Need (vv. 15–16)

15a. Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple;

Because they are pure, clothed in white robes, the multitude stands *before the throne of God*. They *serve him* without pause. The word translated *serve* can imply an act of worship; their acts of service are, in essence, acts of worship. Their service-worship occurs continually (*day and night*). This does not imply the existence of our current constructions of time; rather, it is an indication of ever-devoted service.

This vision pictures more than future heavenly bliss; it can also picture our existence now. Acts of worship can be our acknowledgment of a holy God and our submission to him. However, sin prevents us from practicing authentic worship in its entirety. We, like the white-robed multitude of John’s vision, are free to worship in holiness, in purity, in sincerity, and in truth, for

our sins have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. However, this worship will not be practiced fully and totally until God's final victory, an implication of the book of Revelation as a whole.

15b. and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

This sincere, unfettered worship has another aspect: it occurs when God *will shelter* his people. This alludes to the pitching of a tent, a dwelling place to protect from the elements, undoubtedly echoing Old Testament tabernacle imagery of God's dwelling among his people in the tabernacle (see Exodus 40). John expresses this similarly when he speaks of Christ's first coming as the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14). We await the day when the people of God are not separated from their Lord and can enter an eternal "Sabbath-rest" in the presence of God (Hebrews 4:9).

16. 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat.

Physical needs are satisfied in this perfect relationship of continual worship in God's intimate presence. No one experiences *hunger* or *thirst*. No one experiences famine or other challenging weather phenomena such as oppressive *heat*. The saints are in the glorious presence of God, with his protection and blessing.

C. Tears Taken from the Faithful (v. 17)

17. 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.' "

John's vision returns to the scene of heavenly worship and the source of all hope and salvation: *the Lamb*. Throughout John's writings, he presents Jesus as a good shepherd (see John 10:11–18; 21:15–17). Now John presents the good *shepherd* as the Lamb, leading his followers *to springs of living water*.

Undoubtedly John envisions more than the satiation of physical thirst. The Lamb will lead to "water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). In addition to providing eternal refreshment, the Lamb brings eternal peace and comfort, removing sorrow by wiping *every tear from their eyes*.

Conclusion

A. Washed in the Blood

Suffering was no stranger to American poet Fanny Crosby (1820–1915). Blind since infancy, she undoubtedly experienced many trials and challenges. In spite of all those, she was able to proclaim, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine ... Born of his Spirit, washed in his blood." A prolific writer of more than 8,000 songs, this is just one of Crosby's compositions that speak of Jesus' blood. In the midst of her suffering, Crosby was yet able to praise and worship God for salvation available through the blood of the Lamb.

Revelation 7 is a high point in the Bible concerning worship and praise. This passage is timely for all audiences. It acknowledges that although suffering occurs, confident hope is always called for because of the salvation bought and brought by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus. In times of joy or suffering, that fact should unite us in praise and worship. May we be a people who live in hope

as we await the day when we will hunger and thirst no more, the day of no more tears. Until that day, may our lives be marked with praise and worship to the God who sits on his heavenly throne and to the Lamb who brings salvation.

B. Prayer

Dear God, may we ever offer praise and thanksgiving for your glory, wisdom, honor, power, and strength. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Salvation comes through
the blood of the Lamb!¹
