



Finding Our Way With Race

Summary and Goal

The world continues to lose its way regarding race relations. By looking at how everything will unfold at the end of the age, we should remember the reality that the gospel is for all people – bringing all of us (red and yellow, black and white) into God’s eternal family.

Main Passages

Revelation 5:8-10

Session Outline

1. The Lamb Takes the Scroll (Revelation 5:8)
2. A People Purchased (Revelation 5:9)
3. A Kingdom of Priests (Revelation 5:10)

Theological Theme

The people of God are made up of all nations and races.

Christ Connection

Christ’s blood is what unifies the people of God, regardless of ethnic background.

Missional Application

The people of God, which Christ purchased with His blood, includes people of all races. Since that is true, believers, as Christ’s representatives on earth, must love all people equally.

Historical Context of Revelation

Purpose

Much of the book of Revelation focuses on events at the end of the age (eschatology), more so than any other book in the Bible. But it also focuses on practical choices that believers and unbelievers must make in the course of their lives that have far-reaching consequences at the end.

Author

The traditional view holds that the author of Revelation is the apostle John, who wrote the Fourth Gospel and the three letters of John. Evidences for this view include: (1) the writer referred to himself as “John” (Rev 1:4,9; 22:8); (2) he had personal relationships with the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev 1:4,11; chaps. 2-3); (3) his circumstances at the time of writing (Rev 1:9) matched those of John the apostle (who was placed in Asia Minor from about a.d. 70 to 100 by reliable historical sources from the second century a.d.); and (4) the saturation of the book with OT imagery and echoes implies a Jewish writer, like John, operating in overwhelmingly Gentile Asia Minor.

Setting

The initial audience that received the book of Revelation was a group of seven local churches in southwest Asia Minor (Rev 1:11; chaps. 2-3). Some of these congregations were experiencing persecution (Rev 2:9-10,13), probably under the Roman emperor Domitian (ruled a.d. 81-96). Others had doctrinal and practical problems (Rev 2:6,13-15,20-23). Also behind these surface problems was the backdrop of unseen but powerful spiritual warfare (Rev 2:10,14,24; 3:9).

Special Features

The resurrected, glorified Son of Man (Jesus Christ) revealed Himself to the apostle John, who had been imprisoned “on the island called Patmos” (Rev 1:9). Christ’s twofold purpose was (1) to “unveil” a spiritual diagnosis for seven of the churches in Asia Minor with which John was familiar (chaps. 2-3), and (2) to reveal to John a series of visions setting forth events and factors related to the end times (chaps. 4-22).

The book of Revelation provides an almost complete overview of theology. There is much in this book about Christ, mankind and sin, the people of God (both the church and Israel), holy angels, and Satan and the demons. There is important material on God’s power and tri-unity (i.e., Trinity), plus aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit and the nature of Scripture.

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Session Plan

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? For Further Discussion

What would you say must be true of an act in order for it to bring God glory? Why do you think so?

Introduction

- ? What passages from the Gospels can you think of that demonstrate Jesus' approach to race relations?
- ? Following Jesus' example from those passages, what are some helpful ways that you can pursue racial harmony in your home/workplace/school/etc.?

In this week's session, John's vision of the revelation of Jesus Christ demonstrates the tremendous variety of races and nationalities that are to be found in the unified people of God. They are unified by the blood of Christ. Because of the universal need of Christ's forgiveness and grace in order to be a part of the people of God, there is no place for prejudicial treatment of others.

1. The Lamb Takes the Scroll (Revelation 5:8)

Revelation 5 has the throne room of Heaven as its backdrop. In the unfolding of Revelation, a shift in focus occurs between chapters 3 and 4. The first three chapters of Revelation detail seven letters to seven actual churches with known geographic locations. Chapter 3 closes with the letter to the Church at Laodicea. Chapter 4 opens with John being summoned into the throne room of Heaven, at which point the prophecy of what was to come was revealed to John, as recorded in the remainder of Revelation. Chapter 4 includes John's description of the unimaginable splendor of Heaven. John described the throne and the One seated on it, the four living creatures who offered continual worship to God, as well as the twenty-four elders whose thrones were around the throne of God.

- ? When you consider the events of Revelation 4 and 5, how does your spirit respond? What feelings does it evoke in you?
- ? How did the heavenly beings respond immediately upon Jesus taking the scroll? What does that indicate about how believers should come to Jesus? How much does that resonate with how you typically approach Him?

2. A People Purchased (Revelation 5:9)

The idea of ransom is a price paid to procure the freedom of someone else. In the ultimate case of Christ's redemptive sacrifice, sinners' debts were paid to God so that His just wrath was satisfied and His boundless love fully expressed. The fact that it occurred "by your blood" connected the redemptive work of Christ with its shadow—the Levitical sacrificial system.

- ❓ Why is it important to understand that Jesus "purchased people" instead of just came and took them? How does the idea of ransom help?
- ❓ According to the words of the song, what people did Jesus purchase? Given all their differences, what bound those people together?

3. A Kingdom of Priests (Revelation 5:10)

Verse 10, as the worship song continued, moves to the functional idea of the purchased people. The effect of Christ's redemptive work is that the people of God from all races on the earth are formed into one holy "kingdom and priests to our God." This was a direct tie-in to John's opening doxology in Revelation 1:5-6.

- ❓ What are the implications of God's people from all races being formed into one kingdom? What does it mean to be part of that kingdom?
- ❓ How does it shape your understanding of eternity to know that God's people will reign on the restored earth?

Conclusion

- ❓ When you read about Jesus purchasing people from every tribe and language and people and nation, how does it make you feel to know you'll spend eternity with this group, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ?
- ❓ Who in your life has most effectively demonstrated selfless love of others from all backgrounds? What about that person's story has led to such a love for all people? What part of their practice and journey would you most like to emulate?
- ❓ How have you seen racial reconciliation among believers change over the course of your life as a Christ-follower? Does it encourage you or frustrate you?



Expanded Session Content

Finding Our Way With Race

Introduction

In a 1998 sermon aimed at furthering racial reconciliation in Minneapolis, John Piper challenged the people of Bethlehem Baptist Church with his recollection of Martin Luther King’s famous, “I Have a Dream” speech. The excerpt below is from that sermon and manages to succinctly address the cornerstone of racial unity that is so frequently overlooked: “uniting with a passion for the supremacy of God in all things.”

I was seventeen when, on August 28, 1963, King stood before the Lincoln Memorial and said:

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . . I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Martin Luther King articulated and symbolized a great dream — and it is not yet realized. What I want to do this morning is ratchet that dream up to a full-blown biblical vision of God’s purpose for the world, and then call us as a church to consciously be a part of it. The biblical vision is much bigger than how black and white people relate to each other. King knew that. It’s about people from every race and every language and every tribe uniting with a passion for the supremacy of God in all things.¹

What would be the result if believers were more consumed with making God known and bringing Him glory in all things than they were with winning an argument or “being right”? Tragically, conversations about racial tension and race relations can frequently devolve into sharing one’s own point of view and little else. But, as believers, there is the possibility of doing something much greater. With the leading of the Holy Spirit, believers from all backgrounds can find unity through the common experience of being saved by grace and the consequent worship of Yahweh together.

- ❓ What passages from the Gospels can you think of that demonstrate Jesus' approach to race relations?
- ❓ Following Jesus' example from those passages, what are some helpful ways that you can pursue racial harmony in your home/workplace/school/etc.?

Session Summary

In this week's session, John's vision of the revelation of Jesus Christ demonstrates the tremendous variety of races and nationalities that are to be found in the unified people of God. They are unified by the blood of Christ. Because of the universal need of Christ's forgiveness and grace in order to be a part of the people of God, there is no place for prejudicial treatment of others.

1. The Lamb Takes the Scroll (Revelation 5:8)

Revelation 5 has the throne room of Heaven as its backdrop. In the unfolding of Revelation, a shift in focus occurs between chapters 3 and 4. The first three chapters of Revelation detail seven letters to seven actual churches with known geographic locations. Chapter 3 closes with the letter to the Church at Laodicea. Chapter 4 opens with John being summoned into the throne room of Heaven, at which point the prophecy of what was to come was revealed to John, as recorded in the remainder of Revelation. Chapter 4 includes John's description of the unimaginable splendor of Heaven. John described the throne and the One seated on it, the four living creatures who offered continual worship to God, as well as the twenty-four elders whose thrones were around the throne of God.

The opening of Revelation 5 escalated the drama quickly with the appearance of a scroll in the right hand of God. A mighty angel beckoned one who was worthy to open the scroll, but there was initially only silence. John included that "no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or even look in it." John could see that the scroll was written on both sides – the decree of the Almighty! John wrote, "I wept and wept because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or even look in it."

Finally, one of the elders told John that there was One that was worthy. The elder described the One as "the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David." When John looked, he saw "One like a slaughtered Lamb standing in the midst of the throne..." The glorified Christ stood at the center of the heavenly worship as the only One worthy to open the scroll, and He took it "out of the right hand of the one seated on the throne."

Heavenly Worship

"Readers of this passage who themselves fail to join in with the heavenly host are listening to the text only cerebrally, and not with the exhilaration intended by John, so that his readers are themselves drawn into the heavenly scene as part of the worship. Indeed the reader who fails in the present to enter into heavenly worship, which for them is still to come, will have missed John's purpose by several leagues." – Gordon Fee in commenting on Revelation 5:7-13.²

- ❓ When you consider the events of Revelation 4 and 5, how does your spirit respond? What feelings does it evoke in you?
- ❓ How did the heavenly beings respond immediately upon Jesus taking the scroll? What does that indicate about how believers should come to Jesus? How much does that resonate with how you typically approach Him?

When the Lamb took the scroll, the heavenly beings fell down before Him in worship. Each one referred to the twenty-four elders, depicting the items they had with them. As G.K. Beale helpfully explains, “The phrase ‘having one harp’ refers grammatically only to the elders...which is appropriate in that the elders alone (being partly modeled on the twenty-four orders of Levites commissioned to give thanks and praise to the Lord in 1 Chron. 25:6-31) have the priestly duty of presenting the ‘prayers of the saints’ before God.”³ Beale continues, the prayers of the saints “call for the judgment of God upon evildoers and His deliverance of the righteous. This picture brings assurance to the church that a powerful angelic ministry is operating in heaven on their behalf, even though the church is still suffering on earth.”⁴

2. A People Purchased (Revelation 5:9)

Verse 9 opens with the note that the heavenly beings “sang a new song.” The song was new, in part, because it was now addressed to the Lamb. The heart of this worship song was the worthiness of the Lamb to open the scroll’s seals. As it continued, the various aspects of Christ’s redemptive work were exalted. First, He is worthy “because He was slaughtered.” As Paul extolled in Philippians 2:8, “He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross.” The humble obedience of Christ in carrying out the will of the Father, though it cost His own life, is part of His worthiness. Beale says, “The Lamb’s overcoming through death is a presupposition for His worthiness to receive sovereign authority.”⁵

Second, He “purchased a people for God by your blood.” The purchasing of the people is the effect of His being slaughtered. This should hearken the reader back to Jesus’ own explanation of why He came to earth: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) The idea of ransom is a price paid to procure the freedom of someone else. In the ultimate case of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice, sinners’ debts were paid to God so that His just wrath was satisfied and His boundless love fully expressed. The fact that it occurred “by your blood” connected the redemptive work of Christ with its shadow—the Levitical sacrificial system.

- ❓ Why is it important to understand that Jesus “purchased people” instead of just came and took them? How does the idea of ransom help?
- ❓ According to the words of the song, what people did Jesus purchase? Given all their differences, what bound those people together?

According to Beale, “The redemption or purchase of ‘men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation’ is a redemption which comes to people regardless of race. It is a redemption designed to save some ‘from’ throughout the people groups of the world. It is a redemption without distinction, not a redemption without exception.”⁶ While not every single person will be saved, those who are saved come from every people group. Beale reminds us that this fulfills the ancient covenantal promise given to Abraham so many centuries earlier: “God chose Israel so that through them He might bless the whole world. Thus both the effect and breadth of Christ’s redeeming work are extolled in the first stanza of the hymn.”⁷ For all the differences of those that make up the people of God, the one thing that binds them together is the common manner of entrance into the people of God—the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross.

The New Song

Read the following OT passages that speak of the new song: Psalms 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; and Isaiah 42:9-10. Where do you see the prophetic writings of the new song come alive in Revelation 5:9?

3. A Kingdom of Priests (Revelation 5:10)

Verse 10, as the worship song continued, moves to the functional idea of the purchased people. The effect of Christ’s redemptive work is that the people of God from all races on the earth are formed into one holy “kingdom and priests to our God.” This was a direct tie-in to John’s opening doxology in Revelation 1:5-6. Old Testament writers had mentioned such a scenario previously. As Beale notes, Daniel “prophesied (7:22,27) when he likewise spoke of the saints being given a kingdom and rulership over the nations of the earth, but what the elders are singing actually goes back even farther, for it is the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise to Moses that if Israel obeyed His voice, He would make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6).”⁸

The worship song anticipated the complete restoration of all things. Fee says, “This is a scene that is looking forward to the final, and thus eternal, redemption of God’s people. In doing so it thereby anticipates the restored Eden of 22:1-5, which concludes, ‘and they will reign forever and ever.’ Thus in the ‘new song’ everyone celebrates the Lamb’s redemption, and what that means for His people.”⁹ According to Beale, in fulfilling the Old Testament foreshadowing, “God’s people have been delivered not from Egypt but from the rule of Satan, and they will enter not an old earthly Promised Land but one that covers the entire coming new earth. The slain lamb of the Israelite cult has become the end-time king of the cosmos.”¹⁰

- ❓ What are the implications of God's people from all races being formed into one kingdom? What does it mean to be part of that kingdom?
- ❓ How does it shape your understanding of eternity to know that God's people will reign on the restored earth?

It would have been difficult for John's initial audience, as well as for contemporary believers, to envision exactly what it means for God's people to reign on the earth, particularly since his original audience was undergoing such incredible persecution. At the very least, it would mean that the people of God will have fruitful labor in eternity, after the restoration of all things. The people of God as an eternal priesthood will differ from the Old Testament priesthood, most noticeably in their varied backgrounds. Where the Old Testament priesthood was reserved for the descendants of Aaron, this eternal one will be composed of people of every race and nationality. Together "they will reign on the earth."

Conclusion

In this portion of Revelation, John's vision included a depiction of the worship of the glorified Jesus. As He is worshipped, the song that was sung underscored the universality of His reach in drawing the people of God. In reading these few verses, there are significant points of application for the believer today.

First, there is no biblical ground for racial prejudice because every single person that knows Christ as Savior only knows Him by God's grace. This is true regardless of background, race, language, education, social standing, or any other factor through which the world seeks to fragment society. The thing that binds all believers together is the shared realization that apart from Christ, there is no hope. This is the entry point of salvation—when a sinner confesses his or her sin and brokenness and turns to Christ for salvation. To spend eternity with Him, every person needs the grace of God.

Second, Jesus' shed blood demonstrates His love for people of all races. Jesus did not restrict salvation to just one people group. In fact, that realization was one of the more frequently discussed topics for the first century Christians in the book of Acts. They had difficulty navigating all of the Gentiles (non-Jews) that were coming to Jesus. They rested on the common experience. If someone accepted Christ through the same gospel they had heard and received the Holy Spirit just as they had, then what right did they have to discriminate against those whom God evidently poured out His favor upon? That is a crucial question for the church to ask today as well.

Third, part of what makes the Body of Christ beautiful is the collaborative nature of different cultures serving God together. Consider what John wrote: “and they will reign on the earth.” Believers from every different cultural background will collaboratively reign on the earth together under the leadership of the One who sits on the throne. There is no sense in the Bible that God will strip away the uniqueness of those in Heaven. Rather, what divides culture now will unite believers who share the love of Christ in eternity. The question is, then, why should that not now be the case in an increasing capacity? Certainly believers will not be able to experience that sort of love in full on this side of eternity. But, part of growing in Christ’s likeness means viewing others as He sees them. He loved them enough to die for them and offer His life as a ransom for many.

- ❓ When you read about Jesus purchasing people from every tribe and language and people and nation, how does it make you feel to know you’ll spend eternity with this group, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ?
- ❓ Who in your life has most effectively demonstrated selfless love of others from all backgrounds? What about that person’s story has led to such a love for all people? What part of their practice and journey would you most like to emulate?
- ❓ How have you seen racial reconciliation among believers change over the course of your life as a Christ-follower? Does it encourage you or frustrate you?

Prayer of Response

Close in prayer. Take time to thank God for Jesus who has paid the ransom for people from all tongues, tribes, and nations. Ask Him to help you view those who are from different races and backgrounds than you in the way that He does.

Additional Resources

- *Bloodlines* by John Piper
- *United* by Trillia Newbell
- *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love* by John Perkins

For Next Week

Session Title

- Finding Our Way With Racial Reconciliation

Main Passages

- Ephesians 2:11-22

Session Outline

1. Christ Redefines Our Identity (Ephesians 2:11-13)
2. Christ the Peacemaker (Ephesians 2:14-17)
3. A Unified People for a Unified Purpose (Ephesians 2:18-22)

Memorize

⁹ *And they sang a new song: You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slaughtered, and you purchased people for God by your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation.*

¹⁰ *You made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign on the earth.*

-Revelation 5:8-10

Daily Readings

- Monday - Galatians 3:27-29
- Tuesday - Romans 1:16
- Wednesday - Ephesians 4:32
- Thursday - 2 Corinthians 5:16-19
- Friday - Acts 10:34-35
- Saturday - 1 Corinthians 12:13

Extended Commentary

Revelation 5:8-10

5:7-8. The Lamb came and took the scroll from God without objection or delay. This demonstrates the Lamb's worthiness and ability to unleash the judgments contained in the scroll. The Son perfectly carries out what the Father has determined. It also reminds us of the opening words of the Book of Revelation: "The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him."

At the beginning of verse 8, the "camera" of John's attention begins to pull back. We gradually move out, like an increasingly wide-angle lens

... from the throne itself (v. 7)

... to the guardians of the throne (vv. 8—10)

... to the innumerable angel hosts (vv. 11-12)

... to all the creatures in the universe (v. 13).

The immediate response of the twenty-four elders was to worship the Lamb with the same devotion they were continually offering God on the throne: they fell down before the Lamb (compare Rev. 4:10). The Lamb is equally praised along with the Creator. Now, however, the four living creatures also join in falling down. John now sees additional "worship aids." The harp in ancient times was a handheld stringed instrument, functioning in those days much like a guitar does in modern times. Whether the living creatures also have harps or just the elders is not stated. The purpose of the harps was to accompany the song of verse 9. John also saw—and perhaps smelled—golden bowls full of incense. These bowls were shallow or saucer-like. Billowing incense was offered at the Israelites' tabernacle (Exod. 30:7). David the psalmist compared his prayers rising to God to the smoke of incense: "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice" (Ps. 141:2). The same symbolism is developed in Revelation 8:3-4. The point, of course, is that when saints on earth praise and pray to Christ, their worship is received by Christ in heaven. Scripture constantly teaches that the prayers of God's people impact the throne of heaven, but here is a vivid, visual representation of this truth.

5:9-10. John now hears the elders—perhaps joined by the living creatures—singing a new song, one with a different focus than their original song (Rev. 4:11). If the original song was the "Creation Song from

the Elders,” this is the “Redemption Song from the Elders.” This song may be phrased and punctuated as follows:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,
because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation, [and]
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.

The first line of the song answers directly the question of verse 2, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” The elders respond in the second person, speaking directly to the Lamb (as they had earlier sung to the Creator, 4:11). The basis of the Lamb’s worthiness is his willing sacrifice (you were slain) and the result of the sacrifice (with your blood you purchased men for God). The crucifixion of Jesus, although not specifically mentioned, is the reason for his worthiness. The verb purchased was the normal word used for the business transaction of buying (as in Matt. 13:46). In a few New Testament passages it describes the effect of Jesus’ death (as in 1 Cor. 6:20). His blood given to the point of death was the price of their admission to the kingdom of God (v. 10). A similar verb is usually translated redeemed as when slaves were purchased and set free. (Some of the ancient manuscripts and the King James Version read, “purchased us for God,” but this is a mistake made by ancient copyists based on the notion that the elders John saw were glorified humans rather than angelic beings.)

How far-reaching was the Lamb’s purchase? Persons of every tribe and language and people and nation were included. His redemptive work was not for Jews only, but included representatives from ethnic groups and societies around the world. Today we have a much better understanding than John did of how widely varied human societies are. The worship of the elders anticipated the time when the Great Commission of Christ had reached its fulfillment (Matt 28:19-20).

The result of purchasing representatives from all the earth’s peoples is that they will be a kingdom and priests to serve our God. This marks a wonderful transformation and fulfillment of what God had told the Israelite people in the days of Moses: “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:5-6). Throughout the centuries from John’s

day until now, the Lamb's purchased people have been fulfilling this privilege. The apostle Peter also understood this: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

There is also the future dimension. Lamb's people one day will reign on the earth with their King. This wonderful time is described fully in Revelation 21-22 with the portrait of the new Jerusalem: "They will reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 22:5; see also 3:21).¹¹

References

1. Piper, John. "Every Race to Reign and Worship" on [desiringgod.org](https://www.desiringgod.org). <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/every-race-to-reign-and-worship>. Accessed April 28, 2019.
2. Fee, Gordon D. *Revelation*. NCCS. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011.
3. Beale, G.K. with Campbell, David H. *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Fee.
8. Beale.
9. Fee.
10. Beale.
11. Easley, Kendell, and Max Anders. *Revelation*. Holman New Testament Commentary. Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2014.