

Revelation 7:9-17

Leader Session Guide



Focus Statement

Revelation reveals a Jesus who cleanses all people who follow him.



Key Verse

These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Revelation 7:14



Focus Image



The Great Family (La grande famille)
1963 Rene Magritte (1898–1967 / Belgian). Oil on canvas, Private collection. © Bridgeman Art Library / SuperStock

The Cleansing Jesus

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

In this session's text we encounter a multitude before the throne of God who have gone through a "great ordeal" and now receive an everlasting reward. As you prepare, remember those who have formed and encouraged your faith journey. Thank God for them, and pray that you may be an encouragement for the learners as they are an encouragement for you.

Session Instructions

1. View the Session Prep Video.
2. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
3. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need, if any.
4. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.

Session Overview

This is the third of six sessions on the book of Revelation. Revelation 7:9-17, the session Scripture text, informs us that it is Jesus alone who has made us clean. In its vision of the multitude's heavenly worship and service, this text shapes our lives of faith and service.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Two major points of the session Scripture text are observed only as we look at the larger context: how our session text continues the sixth seal and how it expands the vision of what Israel is.

Revelation 6 describes what happens when the first six seals of the scroll are opened, including the arrival of four horsemen with the first four seals. Then the Lamb opens the seventh seal in 8:1-2. Revelation 7 is more than an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. It responds to questions raised when the sixth seal is opened. When the earthly and heavenly disasters occur with the sixth seal, all those who hide themselves in the mountains and rocks cry out, "for the great day of [God's and the Lamb's] wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (6:17). The session Scripture

SESSION THREE



Messianic:

Belonging to the Messiah, who was the promised one from the throne of David who would redeem Israel. The Jews of Jesus' day believed that the Messiah would be a powerful political figure who would rescue Israel from the Roman Empire. Jesus came as a Messiah with a kingdom that was not of this world.

text responds that a great multitude can stand through these disasters, because they have “come out of the great ordeal” and “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14).

Before the writer sees the multitude, he hears their number: 144,000, a large, complete number composed of 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel (7:4), signifying a sense of completeness. He hears that an enormous but still countable number are sealed, but then he sees “a great multitude that no one could count” (7:9). The 144,000 come from the tribes of Israel, but the multitude is made up of people “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9).

By presenting the same group in two different ways, John redefines Israel, much as he redefines the lion-like **Messianic** power as the slain lamb in 5:5-6. Israel no longer means those who were formerly Israelites. Israel as “nation” or “kingdom” now extends to all people who claim their allegiance to God and to the Lamb. If Israel itself now extends to all peoples, this means that the restoration of Israel also applies to all peoples.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Some interpretations of Revelation relate the “great ordeal” (7:14) to a future global event that will descend on everyone. Such an interpretation dismisses the power that this passage has had for encouraging those who are oppressed.

What is this “great ordeal”? The scant evidence we have from outside sources indicates that the Romans were only beginning to notice the Christian movement at the time Revelation was written. Pliny, writing 15 years after Revelation, asked the emperor for advice on how to deal with Christians, because he had no previous experience or precedent for punishment. This does not mean, however, that believers were not persecuted. The witness of Acts, Paul's letters, and Revelation itself records persecutions and deaths that occurred at the hands of Jewish authorities, local authorities, and larger communities. By speaking of this as the “great ordeal,” the writer of Revelation declares that facing persecution is a sign of the multitude's faithfulness to the one who has sealed them.

Revelation draws upon the prophets' promises of a restored Israel and extends these promises to all people.

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

Lutherans emphasize **justification by grace through faith**. The session Scripture text provides an image of justification. The multitude bears witness to Jesus the Lamb and proclaims that salvation, represented in the seal of protection, comes from God and the Lamb (7:10). The Lamb is the multitude's shepherd and protector, and "he will guide them to springs of the water of life" (7:17). Indeed, the multitude stands before the throne only because "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14).

The multitude responds to justification and cleansing with unceasing worship "day and night within his temple" (7:15). That unceasing worship challenges us to see worship as more than something we do for an hour a week. Worship is a lifestyle or an attitude meant to pervade our entire lives.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

We are meant to identify ourselves with the great multitude and see ourselves as the ones who stand before God, cleansed and made white "in the blood of the Lamb," sheltered and guided by Jesus. We can receive comfort in prayer and encouragement from fellow members of the body of Christ.

In response to being saved and justified by God's grace in Christ, we worship God and reach out to others in our congregation, neighborhood, community, and world who are struggling.

Facilitator's Prayer

Cleansing Jesus, I too often take credit for my journey of faith, when it is you alone who has cleansed me through your blood, you alone who saves me from my ordeals, you alone who shepherds me and guides me to the water of life. As I prepare for this session, I entrust myself and the learners to your never-failing care. Through your Spirit, I pray. Amen.

**Gather** (10-15 minutes)**Check-in**

Invite learners to share completed homework or any new thoughts or insights about the previous session. Be ready to give a brief recap of that session if necessary.

**Justification by grace through faith:**

A central Lutheran belief that we are set right before God only through the love God shows for us through Jesus Christ.

SESSION THREE



Tip:

Be prepared to note the harsh and stormy background of the sky and the sea, in contrast to the peaceful sky seen through the image of the large bird.



Tip:

Invite your group to read or sing together “For All the Saints” (ELW 422).



Bonus Activity:

Read Revelation 5:1-6. Ask learners about the difference between what is heard and what is seen there. Discuss: What is significant about the differences between what is heard and what is seen in Revelation 5 and in Revelation 7?

Pray

God of hope, when we are overwhelmed by life’s trials and tribulations, you remind us that Jesus your Son has gone before us. Cleansed through his death and resurrection and trusting in his life, may we claim the promise of the multitudes that have gone before us and serve you in love and praise all of our days. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Focus Activity

Reflect on the Focus Image. What feelings does this image evoke within you? What do you notice about the background and the scene within the bird? Why do you think the artist called this painting *The Large Family*?



Open Scripture (10-15 minutes)

Provide each person with a palm leaf to hold as the text is slowly read aloud. Have learners imagine the scene of worship before the throne and themselves as part of the throng.

OR

Have someone read the text slowly while learners sketch the scene described in the reading.

Read Revelation 7:9-17.

- What questions does this text raise for you?
- Do you find anything in the text unusual or surprising?
- What trial or ordeal in your life comes to mind when you hear this text?



Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

Literary Context

1. In Revelation 7, the four angels holding back the four great winds are ordered to stop until the servants of God have been sealed (7:3). John hears the number of those who are sealed (7:4-8) and then sees the multitude (7:9-17).

- List the differences and similarities between these two groups.
- Discuss the impact of presenting these two groups together.

2. Many see Revelation 7 as an interlude between the opening of the sixth seal (Revelation 6:12-17) and the opening of the seventh seal (Revelation 8:1-5). Yet, it may be more helpful to see the chapter as a continuation of the sixth seal.

- Read Revelation 6:12-17. How might the multitude of Revelation 7 be connected to Revelation 6:16-17?

Historical Context

1. Though many assume that Roman persecution led to the writing of Revelation (around 95 C.E.), we do not know of any organized persecution at this time.

Read the following texts, and identify where and how the early church was persecuted.

- Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-60
- 2 Corinthians 11:21-29
- Revelation 2:8-11, 12-13; 3:7-13

2. When John describes the comfort and reward that the great multitude receives (7:15-17), he draws upon promises that God gives in both the prophets and the Psalms. Read the following texts and compare them with the promises in Revelation 7:15-17:

- Isaiah 25:8
- Isaiah 49:10
- Ezekiel 34:23
- Psalm 23:1-23

Lutheran Context

1. Using the Lutheran principle of “Scripture interprets Scripture,” read Psalm 51:6-10 and Isaiah 1:16-18. Discuss how these passages help you understand Revelation 7:9-17.

2. Lutherans emphasize that we are justified by grace through faith. In other words, we are set right before God only through the love God shows for us through Jesus Christ, not through our own works or actions.

- The multitude “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). What does this image tell us about how we are justified or made right with God? How does the multitude respond to being justified and cleansed?
- Draw or describe how you would picture justification by grace through faith.



Tip:

On a whiteboard or a piece of chart paper, make one column for “144,000” and one for “Great Multitude.” Have learners tell the characteristics of each group, and record their responses.



Tip:

Form three groups. Assign each group a passage and have each group report back to the larger group.



Bonus Activity:

Discuss whether the session Scripture text and the texts from Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Psalms describe part of our present lives or only part of the future. (Affirm all thoughtful answers.)



Bonus Activity:

Before the session, do an Internet search for images of justification or salvation. Print some of the more intriguing images and bring them to the session. Discuss: Which images are most meaningful to you, and why?