

“REVELING IN THE REVELATION OF JESUS” REVELATION 1:4-8

A lot of us feel passionate about the church -passion that is often expressed in our opinions about what we think constitutes a good or healthy church; opinions as to what we think the church lacks or what the church needs or what the church should or should not be doing.

I don't want to minimize those opinions. Many of them have been shaped by careful reflection and thoughtful concern. Nor would I want to temper that passion, even if it comes out critically or negatively at times. That passion is an indication of how much the church means to us. Indeed, it *should* mean a lot.

But I'm sure you would agree that far more important than what any of *us* thinks and feels about the Church is what *Jesus* thinks and feels about the Church. You talk about passion! After all, the Church is His idea. He established her for His pleasure and His glory. The Church is His Bride. He loves her so much that He gave His life for her.

And because Jesus loves his Church so much it stands to reason that he would be vitally interested and concerned about every detail of her life and health and well-being. It also stands to reason that his Church would be vitally interested and concerned about what he thinks and how he feels about us.

That is why, for the next several weeks, Lord willing, we are going to be studying Revelation 1-3, a passage which contains the clearest and most comprehensive teaching in Scripture about what Jesus thinks and feels about His church. The Book of Revelation was written to seven historical churches in Asia (modern day Turkey) that existed in seven influential cities in the first century that were connected by a great circular road. Chapters 2 and 3 record specific messages from Jesus to each church, and the order in which these messages are given correspond to their location on that road.

These churches were normative of the way Christianity was at the end of the first century. They were typical of the health, well-being, strengths, weaknesses, pressures, and problems that were common in most churches of that day. What is more, they are typical of churches today. You can find contemporary churches resemble any one of these seven churches. Most churches today have a combination of characteristics.

In other words, this Revelation is instructive and relevant for our church, for in these letters we can clearly discern the mind and heart of Jesus. So let's begin in chapter 1, because what is revealed about Jesus in this chapter is foundational, not only for understanding his messages to His churches, but for understanding what the church is all about and why it exists.

Look at **verses 1-3**. *“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending His angel to His servant John, ² who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near”*

This is an introductory statement about the author, the recipients, and the purpose of this revelation and the means by which God chose to reveal it. The author is God Himself, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The recipient is Jesus, His Son. The purpose for God giving this revelation to His Son is so that Jesus might communicate to His servants the things that must soon take place. In other words, it is a prophecy - it is a message about what

is going to happen in the future. “Servants” are followers of Jesus, those who have put their faith in him and belong to Him, and more specifically those who are members of these seven churches in Asia.

But notice, Jesus did not deliver this revelation directly to these churches. He delivered it through two intermediaries. First, He sent an angel to His beloved disciple, John, who would then deliver it to His churches. John, the only surviving member of Jesus’ band of twelve disciples at this time, had been exiled to an island called Patmos in the Aegean Sea not far from these cities. He was an old man by this time but having accompanied Jesus for three years and having been a witness to Jesus’ entire earthly ministry, there was no one on earth who knew Jesus better than John. He was the perfect intermediary for this important message. And John highlights its importance by proclaiming that those who read it aloud and those who hear it being read are blessed.

John continues in **verses 4-5a**. *⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before His throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.*

In the ancient world, it was not uncommon for the author of a letter to begin by formally imparting some kind of greeting or blessing from loved ones that knew His audience. John imparts grace and peace on behalf of the *triune* God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - whom he describes in ways that are peculiar to the Book of Revelation. “The One who is and who was and who is to come” is a reference to God the Father. It is a description of the Father that is found in three other places in Revelation (4:8; 11:17; 16:5), but which is unique to Revelation.

“Him who is,” is a reference to the One who is alive and active in the present, who is the sovereign Lord of this current period of time we call world history. “Him who was,” is a reference to the One who was also alive and active before time. So besides being sovereign; He is eternal. And “Him who is to come,” is a reference to One who will be alive and active in the future. This final description is meant to let His readers know that God will most certainly finish what He started, ensuring that His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Thus, as He has been the sovereign Lord from eternity passed up until the present, He will remain the sovereign Lord for eternity future.

But John also imparts grace and peace from the Holy Spirit. **Verse 4b**, *“...and from the seven spirits who are before His throne...”* Please understand that the literary genre (the form and type and style of the language) of the Book of Revelation is *prophecy*, which is language that is intentionally picturesque, exaggerated, and fantastical, using metaphors, hyperboles, and apocalyptic images that are symbolic and not meant to be taken literally. Such is the language of this phrase. John is not identifying seven individual spirits, but the one and only Holy Spirit who is symbolized by the number seven, which stands for perfection. John could well be describing the Holy Spirit’s seven-fold work or ministry. We will talk more about this when we get to chapter 3.

Not surprisingly, the predominate focus of this salutation is the Lord Jesus Christ, which makes the Book of Revelation a perfect follow-up to our study on the life of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew concludes with Jesus and His disciples on a mountain in Galilee where Jesus declares that all authority on heaven and earth had been given to Him (28:18). Then He gives them the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that He commanded them. And then He says, “And behold, I am with you always, to the

end of the age” (28:20).

Indeed, Jesus had been present with them in the Person of the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity. But none of them had actually seen Jesus since that day. They saw Him ascend into heaven, but they could only imagine what He looked like in heaven, what He actually did in heaven, and how that authority that had been given Him actually manifest itself.

But at last, some sixty plus years later, we have an authentic Jesus sighting. We have a physical description (as we shall see next week). We have words that describe aspects of His character and nature. They begin in **verse 5**. ⁵ *and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.*

You get the sense, here, that John is reveling in this Person he is introducing to the seven churches. And why not? While Jesus was on earth, John was as close to Him as anyone. He had spent nearly every waking moment with Him for three years, seen Him in virtually every conceivable situation, witnessed almost every one of His miracles, heard almost every one of His sermons, seen His popularity rise and fall, watched Him die on a cross, encountered Him after rising from the dead, and witnessed Him ascend into heaven.

Jesus was His best and dearest friend. But now, he is more in awe of Jesus than ever for He is in His glorified state, and he tries his best to describe Him. “The faithful witness.” Witness of what? Witness of the Father. Early in John’s Gospel he declared, *“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and only, who is at the Father’s side, has made Him known”* (1:18). That’s because, according to the writer of Hebrews, *“The Son is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature”* (Heb. 1:3). So much so that Jesus could say, *“Everyone who has seen me has seen the Father”* (John 14:9).

This was an important description of Jesus to the people who belonged to the seven churches of Asia, all of whom were witnesses for Jesus, but many of whom were suffering because of it. When John described Jesus as the *faithful witness*, He was emphasizing Jesus’ faithfulness even unto death.

But Jesus did not stay dead. Look at the next description, **verse 5b**, *“the firstborn of the dead...”* This, of course, is a reference to Jesus’ resurrection, but the emphasis here is that by rising from the dead Jesus pioneered and paved the way for us. His resurrection broke the power of death and enabled those who believe in Him to also rise from the dead and share in His glory. And this title, “Firstborn,” is a title that is associated with glory. The Psalmist declared,

²⁷ *I will also appoint Him my firstborn,
the most exalted of the kings of the earth (89:27).*

Which leads us to the next description of Jesus. **Verse 5c**, *“...the ruler of kings on earth.”* Because Jesus is “the faithful witness,” because Jesus is “the firstborn of the dead,” He is qualified to sit on heaven’s throne, not only in unrivaled splendor and majesty, but with absolute sovereignty. This is a fulfillment of Psalm 2, which says, ⁶ *“As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”*

⁷ *I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.*

⁸ *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.*

⁹ *You shall break them with a rod of iron*

and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Jesus is, indeed, the promised King that was foretold throughout the Old Testament. As we discovered in Matthew, that kingdom was an upside-down kingdom in terms of how it was inaugurated, how it developed and expanded, and what it looked like. But God wants us to be assured that the story isn't over. His eternal purposes have been accomplished exactly as he determined they would be, beginning with King Jesus' astonishing act of love, that no human being had ever conceived was even necessary.

Look at **verses 5d-6**. *"To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

This is what is called a *doxology*. It's a statement - more like an *outburst* - of praise. And this is the first of two consecutive doxologies, each of which is describing things that are praiseworthy about the Lord Jesus.

The grammar in this first doxology suggests that Jesus is worthy of all glory and dominion primarily because He made us a kingdom. This is the main verb of this doxology, and it reveals something significant about God's ultimate plans and purposes. His plans and purposes are focused upon and revolve around His kingdom. And while He was on this earth for thirty-three years, the primary work of Jesus, the King of that kingdom, was to provide a way for sinful, fallen human beings who are, by nature, subjects of Satan's kingdom, to become part of His kingdom - to be transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Paul said as much in Colossians 1: *"He delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins"* (1:13-14).

And in order to qualify us to be part of His kingdom He had to set us free from sin's power and penalty. And that's why John says at the end of **verse 5**, *"He freed us from our sins by His blood."* Jesus' death on the cross, which was motivated by pure love for us, enabled us to literally be "loosed" from the chains of sin, which had kept us in bondage in the kingdom of darkness. In the words of Charles Wesley,

*"Long my imprisoned spirit lay
fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off my heart was free,
I rose went forth and followed Thee."*

This happens the moment we put our faith in Jesus. We are immediately transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, becoming citizens and subjects of that kingdom, which is forever and ever.

That kingdom is invisible to us right now, but it will become visible when King Jesus gets the nod from His Father to return to earth, where He will visibly rule on earth. Look at **verse 7**. *⁷ Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him. Even so. Amen.*

This second doxology is comprised of two messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. The first is Daniel 7:13-14, which describes the enthronement of the Son of Man over all the nations, and then depicts Him coming on the clouds. Jesus is the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. The second is Zechariah 12:10, which predicts the end-time period when God will defeat the enemy nations around Israel and Israel's redemption after repenting of their rejection of God and His messenger. Listen to verse 10. ¹⁰ *"And I will pour out on the house*

of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for Him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

John alters the Zechariah text in two significant ways: the phrases, “every eye” and “all tribes of the earth” have been added to universalize its original meaning. The rejection of God’s messenger and the intense mourning that follows are not limited to ethnic Israel but will occur among people of all nations.

And please note that people of all nations will mourn, not because they are about to be consigned to hell by Jesus, but because they are sorry that they rejected Jesus. This intense grief is the godly sorrow that accompanies repentance, for their eyes have been opened to understand the truth about Jesus and the incredible love that He demonstrated on their behalf, and they are horrified and full of regret that they once spurned Him, ignored Him, and rejected Him.

Then, finally, Jesus addresses the seven churches directly. **Verse 8**, ⁸ *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”*

“The Alpha and the Omega” is a figure of speech called a merism, which states polar opposites in order to highlight everything between the opposites. Similar merisms in Revelation are “the Beginning and the End” (21:6; 22:13) and “the First and the Last” (22:13; 1:17). These merisms express God’s control of all history, especially by bringing it to an end in salvation and judgment. In other words, the One who transcends time guides the entire course of history because He stands as sovereign over its beginning and its end. In that sense, “the Alpha and Omega” are almost synonymous with the phrase, *“who is and who was and who is to come.”*

When we finished Matthew a few weeks ago, Jesus was in a good place. He had single-handedly destroyed all of our enemies through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead - sin, Satan, and death itself. But when we last heard from Jesus He had not yet ascended into heaven. He was still on earth, informing His disciples that all authority had been given to Him, and instructing them to go and make disciples of all nations.

But when He ascended and took His place at the Father’s right hand, things changed...forever. He is no longer merely the leader of a band of twelve or fifty or five hundred. He is the exalted Christ, enthroned in the heavens, King of kings, Lord of lords, the holy One, the sovereign God, the Almighty. Amen.

“Reveling in the Revelation of Jesus”

Revelation 1:4-8

Main Idea: On behalf of the triune God, John imparts grace and peace to the seven churches in Asia and reveals in the person and work of Jesus

Grace and peace from the triune God (4-7)

From the one who was and is and is to come (4a)

From the seven spirits before His throne (4b)

From Jesus Christ (5-7)

The faithful witness (5a)

The firstborn among the dead (5b)

The ruler of kings on earth (5c)

Two Doxologies (5d-7)

First Doxology—Glory and dominion to Jesus

He loves us

He freed us from our sins by His blood (5d)

He made us a kingdom (6a)

He made us priests to His Father (6b)

Second Doxology - He is coming with the clouds (7)

Every eye will see Him including those who pierced Him (7a)

The nations will mourn (7b)

Jesus identifies Himself (8)

The Alpha and Omega (8a)

Who is, who was, and who is to come (8b)