

THE TESTIMONY OF A CHRISTIAN IN EXILE

Revelation 1:1–8

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Scripture today is from the first chapter of Revelation. We enter into the experience of looking at the revelation of Jesus Christ given to John. Today, Revelation 1:1–8: “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen. Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen. ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty’” (NIV).

I. I remember some of my first experiences in reading through this book.

It was as a child my mother had told me that Revelation is the only book in the Bible that promises a special blessing for those who read it. So on Sunday afternoons since activities in our home were strictly restricted on Sundays—sports were out and a number of other things—I would often on a Sunday afternoon curl up on the bed with my Bible and turn to the book that

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promised me a blessing. And wanting all the blessing that I could gain would read it through two or three times in the afternoon. Not really understanding what I was reading but wanting the blessing nevertheless.

This book was written at a time of impending or even during a time of intense persecution by Roman Emperor Domitian. It is written around the year 95 A.D. It was written at a time when Christians were very much in disfavor with the government and with the populace at large. It is no longer the situation like it was in the early part of Acts where they had favor with all the people.

Here was a group of people—Christians—located in a place called Asia. The Asia then wasn't the Asia now. The Asia now we know as continent. But the Asia then was a Roman province, which we would locate today as being in western Turkey. John is writing this letter to these persons, these Christians, in some cities in the Roman province of Asia. A time when Christians were very unpopular and toward them a great deal of antagonism was directed. Their religion was an illegal religion. It was illegal in the sense that the Romans expected conquered or subjugated people to go along with them. If they were loyal then a statue of their God would be placed in the Roman hall of the gods. But any religion coming along pretending to be exclusive as the gospel is—there is no God but the God we worship and we won't let our God be placed with all the other gods because He is the Lord and God—was a faith that just invited persecution. The government aspired to rule all people but the Christian faith aspired to come to all people and all cultures. It was the rival to Rome. Christians were exclusive. They don't participate in many of the social customs and religious practices of the people. They were falsely accused of many evils. For example, many of the pagan populace believed that when Christians got together for their love feast, the Lord's Supper, where they talked about eating the body and drinking the

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blood, it was thought by many that what they were doing was getting together and sacrificing a baby and eating it. Many such crude stories and untrue stories were told about the early Christians and honestly believed by people.

Christians invited the antagonism of the government by refusing to go to war. In joining up with Caesar's troops one had to swear loyalty to the gods of the states and wear the insignia of the gods on the uniform. It was not a popular thing therefore to decline service to the state.

Christians were drawn from the poor and the outcast. They were looked upon as fanatics for their enthusiasm. They came into conflict with commercial and economic interests of the time. For example, the idol makers income was affected where a region began to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ. Also affected were the priests of the pagan religions, the people who were in charge of marketing the animals that were used in pagan sacrifices and in selling their meat. These persons' trade was affected. Wherever the gospel came in power economic interests were threatened.

But perhaps most severely where Christians ran into trouble with the government was when they refused to worship the emperor. Through the history of the Roman emperors there had never been an emperor who took his divinity seriously, although it had been the custom in the Roman senate for some time to ascribe divinity to an emperor. But this emperor who was reigning at the time of the writing of this letter took his divinity very seriously. He gave orders, for example, that when he and his wife showed up in a crowd to attend the theater or a coliseum gathering the crowd was expected to arise and shout in unison, "All hail to our lord and his lady." The word "lord" there definitely meant God. He informed all of his provincial governors and the government in each of the regions that announcements and proclamations sent out in the name of the government were to begin, "Our lord and our god Domitian commands." Anyone addressing

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him in speech must address him as lord and god.

In that kind of a setting this book emerges. John is in exile on the island of Patmos. We're not told in the book itself that the one writing is John the Apostle for the word "apostle" in Revelation is never used of John. But the earliest traditions from church fathers coming from the second century suggest that it is indeed the same writer of John's Gospel that's writing this. He is exiled on the island of Patmos, a small island about fifty miles southwest of the region to which he is writing the churches. In fact the island of Patmos was a little U-shaped island, a crescent shaped island with prongs going out facing the mainland of Asia. It was actually a small island, about 10 miles long and 5 miles wide. But it had a large knoll rising about 1000 feet in the air from the top of which one had an excellent view of the surrounding islands and even the mainland of Asia. John was there as a prisoner. There were various kinds of imprisonment that he might have been under. He could have been there as a work slave. He might have been there simply as an exile who enjoyed the freedom of traversing the island. We don't know this for sure. But in the course of this exile, he sees what God is doing. From his lofty vantage point he is addressing the churches that he has been pastor of, that he's acquainted with: churches that he can't reach now, that a body of water separates him from them. As he opens his letter he tells us some of his testimony in the beginning. It's I think a tremendous testimony which he gives in showing us what a Christian's attitude is to be in a very difficult time.

II. He tells us in the first three verses that he has received the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The word "revelation" is the word in the Greek we would say, "to take away from hiding," "to unveil." The word *apocalypse* is literally this word—to remove from hiding. It's therefore a different kind of spirit than we find in Daniel. When Daniel writes in Daniel 12:9 he says that he was told that the words are shut up and sealed until the end of time. But not so with Revelation.

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Revelation is meant to open our eyes.

Therefore, the first thing we see about this book when we open it, is that it's a revelation of Jesus Christ. It's not called the hiding of Jesus Christ. It's not called the mystery of Jesus Christ. It's not called the puzzle of Jesus Christ. It's called the unveiling, the unhiding, the revealing of Jesus Christ. Which means that in spite of all the various opinions that have floated about Revelation, this book has a very clear and understandable message to the average Christian. For it was not written to theologians. It was not written in to Biblical interpreters. To scholars and the like. It was written to lay people such as you and me who could simply look at its message and see it and not try to find the puzzle within the puzzle. I think some people make Revelation far too difficult because they try to see too much in it. It is book, which unveils, and we're going to see Jesus disclosed to us in a beautiful way in it.

This revelation of Jesus Christ was disclosed to Jesus by God the Father. This squares with what Jesus says before His crucifixion when He's giving a discourse on the future in Matthew 24. He says, "but of that day no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Here therefore is knowledge about the end and the coming of the Son of Man, which the Father is now disclosing, to the Son.

III. It is the revelation given to Jesus Christ for the specific purpose that He might show His servants what must soon take place.

This word "must" indicates necessity. God is in control of history. He is going to bring it to an end himself. It is not haphazard. It must take place and it must take place soon.

When we come across that phrase "must soon take place" or we read in verse 3 "the time is near" we say, "What shall we think about that?" Because obviously as we look at the text it seems to be saying that the coming of Christ is expected at any moment. And now it's twenty centuries

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later and we're still saying Jesus is coming soon. What do we mean by this?

There are those whose approach to Revelation is what I'd call a calendarized approach. They want to try to locate the date and the hour. So everything is read in terms of current events. They get out their newspaper and they read Revelation and to find out where they're at. We know the fallacy of that. We know it from the reformation where there were those interpreters who took Revelation and said it's a history, a prophetic history.

The unfolding of the church. Revelation 11 is the time when the little book is opened, when the reformers open the Bible again and the pope throws seven thunders at them. We don't find what the seven thunders said. They're silent. That's one kind of view. People had a field day when Mussolini was going in World War II because they thought they saw him here and people have had the same problem recently with Kissinger and others trying to fit them in to Revelation. We do something wrong if we do that. It's always a temptation to say, we know more now and we can see more clearly. Everybody who has tried to calendarize that book has run into that problem. What do we do with Jesus is coming soon. Were the early Christians mistaken? Or is it instead being said that the Christian in any generation always lives with the attitude that the Lord is coming soon?

Is the Lord's return to be expected? Either by death or through His coming for me this is the last generation. For me Jesus is coming soon. So here is that sense of immediacy being projected here by the believers. Jesus is coming soon.

But the word "soon" in the Greek language that's used here can also be understood another way. It can be understood from the standpoint of suddenly. Not so much Jesus is coming soon, but when He comes it will be quickly, it will be without delay when He comes. Everything will be accomplished at once.

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I think maybe a way to get at this meaning is take an illustration from what happened in the church building this week. If it cost us \$3,000, it's got to be worth a sermon illustration!

Suppose for a moment that I had been able to communicate to termites. Let's say the life span of the termite is three months. Suppose that three or four years go when we began to detect their presence in the building I'd said to that generation of termites, "If you guys keep gnawing away soon I'm going to take care of you!" They go about their business of gnawing at the framework of the temple. A generation goes by; another generation goes by, another. A year later four generations of termites have come and gone. Then a skeptical generation of termites arises, "Where is the promise of his coming?" All the time, time is going by on a whole different scale for me. They've had four generations; it's only been a year for me—very short. I go about my duties hardly thinking about the damage they're doing to the structure. But finally it comes to a point where after many, many generations of termites and the promise going among the termites "It's coming soon!" The last generation is a skeptical generation that says, "He's not coming." But I say, "You're not going to be allowed to bring this structure down." And when the coming came it was all at once. It was sudden. It was a very short period of time for me and the church. Very long, generations, for them. I think sometimes we have to step out of our standpoint of time and step into God's standpoint of time. God can say, "He's coming soon." But Peter says "A day with him is as a thousand years." It's a different calendarization. But He's coming.

One of the key messages to Revelation is God is not going to let the sinful infection which has been brought into the fold so destroy the temple of creation which He has built, that He doesn't have the option himself of closing down the history of time. Man is not going to bring about the conclusion to His history. God is, through Jesus Christ.

Therefore we understand he's coming soon and He is coming suddenly—all at once. When He

comes these events will happen in speedy moments of time coming together. The word which is used for He comes soon or He comes quickly in the Greek is the word from which we get the word “tachometer.” A tachometer is something, which measured velocity. You step on your accelerator, if you floor it, the tachometer goes wild. What this word is saying in terms of the coming of Jesus is that when He comes He will quickly wind up the affairs of earth. We have One who is coming. This revelation has been shown to John in illustrations by an angel.

IV. It’s been shown to John who describes himself as the faithful witness who gives testimony.

“Witness” is a very important word in revelation.

It’s the same word in the Greek as it is in English—the word “martyr.” In the days when it was first used, the word “witness” didn’t mean martyr but it came gradually. “Martyr” came to mean someone who stuck by their story even at the point of death. So John is saying he is standing by this testimony to Jesus Christ.

There’s a blessing pronounced upon it. “Blessed is he who reads aloud and blessed are they who hear.” The Early Church when they were gathered for worship did not have individual copies of the Scripture. It would have been impossible for them to have because of the cost involved. They couldn’t have a copy machine to make John’s message all available to them. So the way they got this apocalypse, this revelation, was for someone to stand up in the Christian congregation and read the Scripture. Then, those who heard, and those who read would be blessed. There is therefore a transference of this to us. As we take this Book of Revelation in our hand and have it read and explained, and hear it and keep it again, there is the blessing of God.

We’ll look as we go through Revelation at what this blessing entails. John, once he has explained his revelation, bears testimony to the fact that he has received a revelation of God.

V. Then to these churches that are gathered together in worship, who are receiving this letter, he brings greetings from the triune God.

Verses 4–5 say “John to the seven churches that are in Asia.” These seven churches will be listed for us in chapters 2 and 3 where each of them receives a separate message from the Lord.

We know by geographical study of the area and by the New Testament that there were actually more than the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. But John simply focuses in on that word “seven.” If you look at a map to see where those seven churches are you’ll find that John is writing to churches that are in sort of a rough circle. A postman’s route evidently. And the letter is making that route. Since there are seven churches that are singled out what John is expressing symbolically is that he is writing to the whole church in its completeness. “Let him who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” Meaning it’s a letter not only to these seven but it describes the complete hearing needed to be given by all churches everywhere.

The content of the greeting is “grace to you and peace.” Beautiful words. Words similar to what Paul speaks in his letters. Grace establishes peace. You never have in the New Testament “peace and grace.” It’s always “grace and peace.” Grace speaks of what God has done. Grace speaks of our standing in Him. But peace represents our experience. We never have peace unless we have grace.

Then John identifies who is giving the greeting. The churches are being greeted by God the Father. He says “grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come.” A phrase straight out of Exodus 3:14 when God reveals himself to Moses—“I am who I am.” “You want to know what My name is? I am who I am. That is, I choose who I am. You don’t have the ability as a mortal man to classify Me, to categorize Me, to put me in a dictionary, to use your term of Me. I’m not ‘the man upstairs.’ I am who I am. I will be who I will be.”

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God sets the right to define himself. He will not submit himself or yield himself to be shaped as an idol by us in concept or actuality.

John does an interesting thing in the language. He literally says here “grace to you and peace from He who is.” That is poor grammar we know. It’s poor grammar in English and it’s poor grammar in Greek. But it is as though John was saying, “Greetings from He who is,” to say, “I’m not going to alter the name of God to fit into the rules of grammar. It is He. And the way he uses grammar in this text underlines his defiance of faith. Do the Christians have to defy Caesar? Yes they do, because the Lord God omnipotent reigns. Will the language of grammar force us to alter the name of God? No. We’ll defy grammar before we alter the name of He who is and who was and is to come.

He brings greetings from God the Spirit and an unusual phrase is used for God the Spirit: “From the seven spirits who were before his throne.” John here is reaching back perhaps the description of the Spirit in Isaiah 11:2 where the Spirit is identified as the Spirit of the Lord, the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of understanding, the spirit of counsel, the spirit of might, the spirit of knowledge, and the spirit of the fear of the Lord.

In the New Testament the Spirit is referred to in the singular but here he is referred to in the plural. When he’s referred to in the singular His unity or His oneness is affirmed. When He’s referred to in the plural it means He is not confined to one place, to one time, to one congregation, or to one method of action. He can be there but He can be here. Seven spirits therefore stands for the shape of the Spirit God has given to each of the seven churches that are being written to. The Spirit is present. No assembly, no group of believers is left without the Spirit’s presence. So “Greetings from the Spirit.”

Then he brings greetings from Jesus the Messiah who is identified here as the faithful witness.

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How important this word was to first introducing greetings from Jesus to these believers in Asia. Many of them were prepared to go before the governor and, on penalty of death, refuse to deny Jesus Christ. So they're reminded that Jesus himself had been a faithful witness. That when He had stood before Pilate, when He stood before the high priest had been asked His identity, "Are you the Christ the Son of the Blessed?" He said, "I am." A faithful witness. A faithful witness is one who tells us the truth even when we don't like to hear it.

He is the firstborn of the dead. "Firstborn" means prominence, ranking. It means that others are to follow. He's the first. He's created a new order of which we share a part. Do we have to die for our faith? Then be sure that we come through triumphant resurrected. And he is the ruler of the kings of the earth. What a surprise to Caesar. What a surprise to the rulers of this world that the one whom John discloses is the one who rules the kings.

John's message to these churches and to us is things aren't what they seem to be. His very first notice of the kings of the earth, which are causing so much trouble to the Christians, is the fact that these kings have a ruler. And this rulership of the Lord Jesus Christ is made possible only because of His resurrection, because of the fact that He's been a faithful witness.

You remember in the temptation of our Lord the devil came to Him and said, "If you bow down and worship Me, I'll give you all the kingdoms of this earth," and the Lord refused it. I like to wed that passage with this one here. Satan is typical. He has a lot of empty promises. Maybe he could have made Jesus king of the current kingdoms for a few years but that's about it. His promise, which he brings to us in temptation, is "If you follow me I'll get you happiness, I'll give you life and all." That's bunch of garbage. The Lord remained true to His calling and the result of it is He is the king of the rulers of the earth.

So this greeting from God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, is such that praise is

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evoked in John's heart toward God. That praise is especially directed toward Christ who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and has made us a kingdom.

When the Lord's name is mentioned there is an outburst of praise. There are no outbursts of praise that result from doubts. Doubt has no outbursts. But John is worshipping the Lord. Out of it comes praise. He praises Jesus for these things. That He loves us. And the word there is in the present tense. He loves us. Meaning it's ongoing. It's felt today.

But then he makes a sharp change in the tense. He says, "He has freed us from our sins." The King James says, "washed". The difference between these two words "freed" and "washed." In the Greek language they're pronounced identically only separated by one letter in terms of difference of spelling. But the better rendering here is "set us free" or "loosed us."

It's in the past tense. It's the idea that Christ loves us now and continues to love us and always loves us but there was a point in time in which He freed us from our chains. He set us free. I say this because there's sometimes a misunderstanding about the Christian life. When we come to Christ, do we need to keep becoming a Christian over and over again? Obviously, the answer is no. There is a decisive act – past tense in time in which Christ set us free from our chains. This is a new birth experience—born again. Do we ever sin after that? Yes. But we always look back and say that was the point in which He broke the bonds, broke the chains. He did this by His blood. By the power of His blood He affects reconciliation between us and God.

Therefore He made us a kingdom and He made us priests. The kingdom is in the sense that we're described collectively. Just like there's a mineral kingdom, a vegetable kingdom, there's an animal kingdom, and there's man's kingdom. Now there's a kingdom higher than that, a kingdom of priests and rulers unto God. The word "kingdom" describes so what we are as a group, born again in Christ. The word "priests" describes our individual action, ministering to

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the Lord, ministering to one another.

Therefore praise comes. The praises in Revelation is like wading into the ocean. First few steps—“Glory and dominion be unto him,” he’s beginning to see Jesus. There are two ascriptions of praise to the Lord given here in verse 5. When he’s praising God in Revelation 4:11 it increases to three ascriptions of praise glory and honor and power. As he sees more of Jesus being revealed in Revelation 5:13 it’s blessing and honor and glory and might. And by the time you come to Revelation 7 it stretches all the way to seven fold of praise honor and glory to God blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and might and power be unto our God forever and forever. It’s as though a true description of the Christian life when we come into it we begin to see what God has done, praise the Lord! But as you know Him more and as you walk with Him and as His gift of life increasingly unfolds added that praise the Lord are other descriptions, which apply to Him. So we get into this beautiful element of praise toward the Lord.

VI. Then in verse 7 John gives another thing in this introduction: He restates the promise of the Lord’s coming.

“Behold he is coming with the clouds. Every eye will see him and everyone who pierced him and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so Amen.”

When a teacher leaves the room students change. Erasers fly and chalk caricatures are put up on the board. When the teacher returns however their coming affects a visible change in the room.

The coming changes things.

That is the thought associated here with the coming of the Lord. His coming into the room of His creation does change things. John here is not so much concerned with how the coming of the Lord will affect the believer but he is concerned with how the coming of the Lord affects the

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unbeliever. For he says this coming will be a supernatural coming. He'll be coming with the clouds. Jesus said that He would return again with the clouds in Matthew 24. When He ascends into heaven the angels tell the disciples as He's taken up in the clouds, "the same manner you see Him go, He'll also return." In other words His coming is not going to be like some who believed that things will get better and better and everybody will be converted and the church will change the world. The coming of Christ will be seen in the growth of God's people. No. He's coming with the clouds. And every eye will see Him. It will be a visible coming. And especially John focuses on those who have identified with being the persecutors of the Lord: those who crucified Him. This describes those in any age who have taken their stand with the murderers of Christ. His coming will cause great grief.

This is a theme in revelation that occurs time and time again: at the coming of the Son of God, the grief will not be so much the grief of we should have received Him as Lord and Messiah. The grief is being expressed from unrepentant people who, in the midst of seeing great revelations which come before His coming—even great visitations of judgment, do not illicit repentance or change. Here is that final sort of pitiful wail that we did not prevail. It's not so much the wail from "We were wrong. Now He's king and we'll repent." It's the wail that says, "We lost the game!" They will wail because of Him.

Finally John in this section leaves a prophetic word from God himself. God is seen as speaking directly, one of the rare instances of scripture this happens. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," said the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come. The almighty." Alpha and Omega of course are the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. When this phrase is used it not only means God is the first and the last. But it means that God is all the letters in between. God not only starts but God ends and God is in the whole process of everything from beginning to end.

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As we come to sort of a personal and devotional application of this letter to our own lives, look at problems that we face, stresses that we face, people that we face and sins that we face that seem bigger than us. Certainly that's the earthly view, the worldly view. The persons to whom this letter first came could take that same sort of view towards their day end. The days that are visible, look so powerful and so strong and so binding. But there is a moment in which the believer leaps up into heaven and sees with John the other side of things—the Lord God omnipotent, all-powerful. The Lord God who is not only strong enough to save us as an individual person but strong enough to rule the whole world and whose coming is the next great event which is to take place. It is that continuing hope in the Lord's presence and His return that we as Christians take our stand. We say we serve one who has come and who is coming once more. We're identified with Him. With all of our weaknesses we confess He is all-powerful. With all of our helplessness we confess that He is strong. With all of our inability to escape the gravitational pull and the aging process we say He is one who changes not, who is forever and forever. Amen.

This book is going to help teach us to praise the Lord and see Him in His power.

Closing Prayer

So we lift our hearts to You, Father, Son and Spirit, this morning. We give You thanks for who You are. You have not abandoned us on earth to an isolated spot in the universe, which is doomed for extinction some day when the solar system blows up. But you are the one who has an ever-present love for us right now. You are the one who visited this earth to free us from our sins. And you are coming again to receive us to Yourself and to judge the world. We confess You today. We bear witness to Your reality. Teach us, Lord, as we go through this book to learn

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how to praise You more and to understand better to the life you have given us to live. We ask
this in Your name. Amen.