

“APOCALYPSE SOON”

The Revelation of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:4-19)

The first three verses of the Book of Revelation are a kind of prologue to the main message and visions of this book. John then introduces personal greetings in the next section in the form of a benediction of the Triune God.

John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before His throne; And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (v4-6)

Modern letters tend to identify the writer at the end. However ancient letters usually name the writer from the beginning. He wrote to seven churches, which were located on the Western section of modern Turkey. Tradition is that John pastored the church at Ephesus and he might well have spent time in the other six, which were relatively near that city. The salutation of “*grace*” and “*peace*” were common Christian greetings to other believers (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3, Gal. 1:3). The order is not without significance. Peace is a result of the work of God’s grace in the life of a believer. This grace is not some manufactured feeling but something that flows from the Three Persons of the Triune God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

John used a Trinitarian benediction to finish off this subsection from v4b-6. A benediction (from the Latin *bene*, meaning “well” and *diction* meaning “to speak”) is a prayer of God’s word to His people that invokes divine protection and blessing upon God’s people. In most churches, this is at the end of a ceremony or worship service and is patterned after the Aaronic blessing of benediction in Numbers 6:24-26 and the Pauline benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14.

The One who is, “*from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come....*” is clearly speaking of the First Person of the Blessed Trinity, God the Father. The description, “*which is, and which was, and which is to come....*” is what is called an anthropomorphic term that utilizes human terminology (i.e. past, present, and future time) to describe an eternal person who transcends time. Guzik observes, “It is never enough to just say that God is, or to just say that He was, or to just say that He is to come. As Lord over eternity, He rules the past, the present, and the future.” The description of the Holy Spirit as “*the seven Spirits which are before His throne*” has prompted much wrong speculation. The use of the number seven is often used in the Bible to signify completion. Indeed, this number is widely used in the Book of Revelation – seven stars, seven churches, seven angels, seven vials, seven trumpets, seven years of GTP etc. So the “*seven Spirits*” here is a symbol of the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the seven churches (cf. Isaiah 11:2; Zech. 4:1-10).

Christ is described as “*is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth*” as He alone was the first Person to be resurrected from the dead in human history never to die again. There were other humans before Him raised from the dead, like Lazarus, but they eventually died again. Jesus Christ is the “*prince of the kings of the earth*” as He is sovereign over all human rulers and He is coming to reign over the earth.

The benediction then moves into a doxology of praise to Jesus Christ who is the Great Subject of this Book of Revelation, “*Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.*” Jesus Christ didn’t start loving us the moment we were saved or because we were loveable but He has always loved us as He loved us with an everlasting love, “*The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.*” (Jer. 31:3) We are his elect people chosen out of love for His glory before the world was even created, “*According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.*” (Eph. 1:4)

John was clearly so overcome with emotion at the love of Christ for sinners like him and the privileges of priesthood and royalty bestowed on him that he burst forth in this doxology, which explains the gospel in a nutshell, “*Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.*” He recognized that it is because of Christ’s love and the application of the saving work of the shed blood of Christ that we are washed from our sins and not because of any merit in our own selves. Spurgeon made a wonderful comment about that shed blood, “The priests could only cleanse with blood of bulls and goats; but he has washed us from our sins 'in his own blood.' Men are willing enough to shed the blood of others. How readily they will enter upon war! But Christ was willing to shed his own blood, to pour out his soul unto death, that we might be saved.”

Now we have access directly to God through our Great High Priest Jesus Christ so we can worship Him and serve Him in a priestly ministry and one day we will reign with him on the earth. There is royal blue blood in the veins of every child of God as we are joint heirs with the King of Kings.

Behold, He cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him. Even so, Amen. (v7)

John will set forth in dramatic visionary form the events of the future. However, before he does he gave a short preview in summary form of the Second Coming of Christ. There is little that is new here, as this has been revealed in other previous revelations of Scripture,

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. (Dan 7:13)

And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn. (Zech. 12:10)

And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. (Matt. 24:30)

There will be great mourning of both Jews, “*and they also which pierced Him*” and Gentiles, “*and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him*” when Christ appears. The word “wail” here is *kepto*

meaning “to cut” which is normally associated with pagan practice of cutting with knives to seek the attention of their gods (cf. 1 Kings 18:28). We know from Zechariah that some Jews will truly repent (and Gentiles - Rev. 7:9) but others may simply be expressing fear of their doom.

This awesome picture of the King of Kings in power and glory prompted John to immediately respond from his heart with the prayer, “*Even so, Amen.*” Studying biblical prophecy should not entertain us but move us to cry with expectation for the Blessed Hope of Christ’s return.

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty. (v8)

It was as if the Lord responds to the prayer of John’s heart, “*Even so, Amen*” by interjecting with His personal signature on the visions the aged Apostle had seen. This signature revealed God’s attributes that guarantee the fulfillment of His promise in these visions. He is, “*Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending...*” The Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet so this idiom suggests the eternal and omniscient nature of Jesus Christ – He knows all things and He controls all things from beginning to end. Christ transcends time, space, and matter because He created them. Time cannot control or limit the great self-existent, “*I AM THAT I AM.*” (Exodus 3:14) It is not just that He is the Alpha and Omega but He is all the other letters in between! These attributes are further reinforced here by the expressions, “*which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.*” There is not a single atom on this planet that is not under the sovereign rule of the Almighty God! For if He is not sovereign over all then He is not truly sovereign at all.

I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. (v9-11)

John was in the midst of a wave of great persecution launched by the Emperor Domitian against the Church, “*I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation...*” The first great wave was 30 years previously under Nero when Peter and Paul were martyred around 65 AD. John must have been lonely and somewhat downcast in losing his liberty, ministry, and fellowship on the isle of Patmos. It would have been a harsh existence imprisoned to do hard labour on that barren, uninhabited island for an old man. All the other apostles were now probably dead. John had only a short time to live. For six long decades the disciple “*whom Jesus loved*” (John 13:23) hadn’t heard the voice of Jesus Christ since the Ascension from the Mount of Olives. Now his beloved Master spoke to him at one of the lowest points in his ministry and reassured him that He is, “*Alpha and Omega, the first and the last.*” What a thrill that must have been to his heart. John might have been exiled from the fellowship of the church on the Lord’s Day or Sunday but Jesus Christ had not forgotten him.

John’s ministry wasn’t over in lonely and isolated Patmos. Indeed, his greatest ministry was yet future in being the instrument to bring the greatest revelation of Jesus Christ to humanity. He would become the “*Postman of Patmos*” to first the nearest seven churches, “*What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia*” but also the

“Postman of Patmos” to the whole world. There is an important application there for us all. God can use us at any age and in any place for His glory. No one would have guessed, least of all John, that this aged exiled apostle could be used in such a way.

These churches were situated in a postal circuit for Asia Minor. Messengers would travel in the order stated here in the mission given to John on a circular road that linked the seven, “unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.”

7 Churches of Revelation



And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. (v12-16)

After hearing the voice of Christ, John turned to get a vision of the risen Christ. The use of the number seven here is significant as it represents seven aspects of Christ’s ministry in His Church. John MacArthur explains, “He empowers, intercedes for, purifies, speaks authoritatively to, controls, protects, and reflects His glory through His church.” We know that the seven golden candlesticks represent each of the seven churches (v20). It seems they were selected to be representative of all churches both in John’s day and at any time in the history of the church.

One important fact is that the Head of the Church is present in every one of those churches, “*And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man...*” In the next chapter we are told that Christ is not just present but actively observing each and every member and ministry as He that, “*walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.*” (2:1b) It is the continual presence of Christ in the midst of each church that empowers it “*for without me ye can do nothing*” (John 15:5b) so that, “*the power of Christ may rest upon me.*” (2 Cor. 12:9b) These seven churches might not have visibly witnessed Christ walking in their midst but He was really there. Likewise,

we today may not see Him visibly in our churches but He is truly there and the effects of His presence are manifest to the discerning spiritual believer.

The clothing of the Risen Lord, *“clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle”* represents His office of a King and a High Priest. Jesus Christ is our Great High Priest, *“who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us”* (Rom. 8:34) for *“Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.”* (Heb. 2:17-18; cf. 4:15; 7:25) The white head and hair is symbolic of His eternity as the *“ancient of Days.”* (Dan. 7:9, 13, 22) Christ not only intercedes for His church but He purifies it, *“His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace..”* The brass and the fire speak of cleansing as the eyes of the Lord burn through all hypocrisy with piercing clarity and His burning bronze feet trample down in judgment the tares and cuts away sin in painful chastening, *“ For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.”* (John 5:22)

The voice of Christ is significant, *“and his voice as the sound of many waters.”* The impression here is of the powerful Word of the Almighty God like the roar of a great storm that deafens all and silences their conversation. This is the powerful voice that spoke a universe into existence in Genesis 1 and that will command the dead to come forth from the graves. (John 5:28-29) We are also told that the Head of the Church holds every church in His right hand, *“And he had in his right hand seven stars.”* This is the right Hand of power that He promised concerning His children would protect them from eternal danger, *“And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand.”* (John 10:28) It is also the controlling Hand that places them where He wants them and guides them as the Good Shepherd. Our Lord doesn't panic but implements His plans. He is building His Church and the gates of hell will never prevail against it. We can trust Him to keep that promise.

There is also another powerful image, *“and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword...”* This undoubtedly represents the living Word of God that convicts sinners, defends His church and attacks their enemies, *“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”* (Heb. 4:12; cf. Eph. 6:17) This is the sword that will judge all His enemies in the end, *“Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”* (Rev. 2:16)

The final image of Christ is of His glory, *“and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.”* Christ came in relative in obscurity and humility with His glory veiled in His First Coming but in His Second Coming the whole world will see Him coming in *“power and great glory.”* (Matt. 24:30) He is not coming to hang on a tree but to sit on a throne.

And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death. (v17-18)

Even though John knew intimately the Lord Jesus Christ, when he saw Christ unveiled in His glory, *“And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead.”* (cf. Matt. 17:6) When Daniel saw the glorified Christ he also collapsed before Him (Dan. 10:8-9) Too many treat Christ flippantly and

irreverently as kind of “cosmic buddy” rather than the majestic, King of kings who has the authority and power to judge all. Our worship to God must be holy and reverent to reflect the awesome experience of coming into the presence of the Saviour. We must come as wondrous worshippers! Jesus Christ is coming in terrible judgment that will shake all of humanity to his or her core, *“And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?”* (Rev. 6:15-17)

The Saviour immediately touched His humble servant and encouraged him not to be afraid, *“And He laid His right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.”* Christ conquered death eternally when He rose from the dead, *“Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over Him.”* (Rom. 6:9) Our Risen Lord has authority over death and hell so the child of God that is united in Him has no need to fear death, *“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive”* (1 Cor. 15:22) and *“because I live, ye shall live also.”* (John 14:19)

Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches. (v19-20)

The Lord now commissioned John for one last great act of service to the Church, *“Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter....”* The Lord gives John a divinely inspired three-fold outline of the book:

- (1) **The Things Which Thou Hast Seen (Rev 1)**
- (2) **The Things Which Are (Rev 2-3)**
- (3) **The Things Which Shall Be Hereafter (Rev 4-22)**

Now the message began to be unfolded. The first two symbols used are interpreted for John, *“The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.”* In the next chapter the aged apostle will receive seven specific messages for these seven specific churches. However, we must not forget the real Star in this story. Spurgeon warns,

“What do you see in Christ’s right hand? Seven stars; yet how insignificant they appear when you get a sight of his face! They are stars, and there are seven of them; but who can see seven stars, or, for the matter of that, seventy thousand stars, when the sun shineth in his strength? How sweet it is, when the Lord himself is so present in a congregation that the preacher, whoever he may be, is altogether forgotten! I pray you, dear friends, when you go to a place of worship, always try to see the Lord’s face rather than the stars in his hand; look at the sun, and you will forget the stars.”