

Jesus in Revelation

PART 1 • REVELATION 1:1-8

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*****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE*****

It is good to be with you this morning! By way of reminder, I hope all of you have the elements for the Lord's Supper, as we will be partaking together after our study this morning. And then, after the Supper, Caleb will be leading us in the song, "Just as I Am" (#380).

As we get started this morning, I wanted to let you know that Wayne Jackson passed away just over a week ago. He never came here to Madison, but we have been blessed by his writing through the years. He preached for nearly 60 years, most of those in Stockton, California, where he started Christian Courier, a monthly journal, back in the 1960's. I met brother Wayne back in the early 80's when he came to the church in Crystal Lake, Illinois, to preach for a week. I had to give up my room so he had a place to sleep, and in exchange, he gave me some of his books. And even at a young age, I was impressed. Fast-forward a few years, and when I started at Freed-Hardeman in January 1990, I knew almost nobody. And when the lectures came around in February, Wayne came to speak, and took me out to lunch with his family – it was good to see a familiar face. And since then, I have shared perhaps hundreds of his articles with you. He's written dozens of books. The man is brilliant, but he writes in a way that can be understood. Some of you know that back in 2007 we went through a difficult time with a bizarre false teaching that tried to take hold here at the Four Lakes congregation, and brother Wayne was a huge help and very encouraging to me personally. In fact, just a few days ago I looked up his last email to me back in 2007, and he closed with the encouragement to, "Press on," because, "...the goal is much nearer as the years pass." Yes, it is! So, I just wanted to honor Wayne and his life this morning.

I also wanted to share some good news from a few days ago – Don, from Shults-Lewis, stopped by this past Wednesday morning! And all of you did a great job collecting the cake/cookie/brownie mixes over the past few weeks. We also sent a huge pile of used toner and inkjet cartridges, quite a few old cell phones, and a good number of checks (and some cash) for the perishables down there. So, thank you for caring in this way! We did a good thing this week by taking care of the fatherless as God has instructed.

And then I also wanted to share a highlight of the week. Several weeks ago, Jerry said he was looking for some way to listen to the word of God. As reading gets more difficult, he doesn't want to drift spiritually, so he wants to hear it, perhaps somebody reading the Bible on cassette. Some of you might not even know what a cassette

is! But, I said I'd be thinking about some possibilities. And just a few days later, I mentioned this to Ruth, and she looked in some of Harold's things and found the entire Bible on cassette! Actually, it's a series of cassettes. She was willing to donate that, so I dropped it off at the Turley home this past week. I asked if I could take a picture and share it, and they agreed. And this was a highlight of my week, being able to see Jerry and Karen again. It has been too long.

As our tradition has been, we are starting this morning with a brief summary of God's plan for our salvation. He sent his only Son to this earth, and we killed him. He was buried, and then he was raised up on the third day, and in response, we must believe the message, we must turn away from sin, and we must allow ourselves to be buried with him in the act of baptism, at which point the Christian life begins. And our good news this week comes to us from the Lord's church in Cleveland, Tennessee. Ben, their preacher, is a friend of mine. We met at Polishing the Pulpit several years ago, as we had both volunteered to help set up a Vacation Bible School for nearly a thousand children. He has since moved to Cleveland, Tennessee (near Chattanooga), and he got a call last Sunday afternoon that Christian and Caley were ready to be baptized. So, if you would like to follow their example, you can give me a call this afternoon, and I would be glad to get together to study.

This morning, I would invite you to imagine with me a scenario where the government starts burdening the church with excessive regulations – telling us that we are not allowed to worship together, even preventing us from meeting together in private homes. And I want us to try to imagine not being allowed to go shopping (to buy, or to sell, or to trade). And I want us to try to imagine that the regulations are so burdensome that some of us start losing our jobs, so we are no longer allowed to provide for our own families. It's not too hard to imagine, is it? What I have just described is exactly what started happening in the mid-90's back in the First Century. It got so bad, in fact, that John, the last living apostle, an old man at this point, is sent away to the Roman version of Alcatraz, a prison island known as Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, just off the coast of modern-day Turkey. Tradition tells us that John was serving as an elder at the church in Ephesus. And as he is in exile on this island, he receives a series of visions from God, and he writes these down and sends them to seven congregations throughout the Roman province of Asia Minor. And this message is what we know today as the book of Revelation. This morning, I would invite you to be turning with me to the book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament.

Two years ago, one of our senior saints asked for a series of lessons on the messages to these seven congregations. And I'd like to study these messages in Revelation 2-3, starting in January. But before we get to that point, we need to look at John's own introduction in Revelation 1. Many people think of Revelation as a strange book of beasts, and scrolls, and wrath, and bloody battles – and it is a strange book, but there is a purpose to it, explained by John in the opening verses. Notice with me, please, Revelation 1:1-3,

¹ The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, ² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

Just a few notes here, starting with the fact that this book is a **“revelation.”** The word John uses here is the basis for our English word “apocalypse.” It refers to something being unveiled or revealed or uncovered. And we find here that Jesus is the one being revealed. John is writing some people who have never seen the Lord, and so Jesus is revealing himself in these visions.

We also find (in verse 1) that Jesus ***“communicated”*** or ***“signified”*** these things by His angel to John. This book, then, is a book of “signs.” This book has been “encoded,” we might say. Today, we get a lot of mail from various prisons, and many of those envelopes are stamped with some kind of a warning, “This letter comes from a prison.” It’s a reminder to not fall for some scam or trick, but it’s also a reminder that this mail might be monitored. The things you send and receive to this address might not be private. And that’s what’s going on with John. He’s writing from a Roman prison island, he’s imprisoned for preaching the gospel, and he’s writing to seven congregations, encouraging them to stand strong in the face of persecution, and reminding them that they will ultimately be victorious over Rome. The Greek word for victory is the basis for our English word “Nike.” The word is found 20 times in the New Testament, and 17 of those are here in Revelation. God’s people will be victorious. They will “nike” over the Roman Empire. That’s not a message Rome wants to get off this island! So, the message is written in signs. We have somewhere around 500 references to the Old Testament in Revelation, communicating in a way that God’s people would understand, but in a way that would be seen as nonsense to Rome.

We also have a reminder in these opening verses, that the things in this book will take place ***“soon.”*** And this helps us understand Revelation. The word can refer to things happening ***“quickly,”*** once they happen. But we have a reminder here at the beginning that the things in this book are meant primarily to encourage the original readers as they were reading. In other words, this book isn’t about Hitler, or Saddam, or Osama, or some other future event, but this book is primarily about things that were to happen ***“soon,”*** to the original audience.

And this brings us to a special blessing in these opening verses, ***“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.”*** As with the rest of the New Testament (and the Old Testament), this message was meant to be read publicly. And so, there is a blessing on the one who reads and on those who hear. We think of Ezra reading the Law, we think of Jesus reading Isaiah in the synagogue, we think of Paul explaining that his letters were to be read ***“in the church”*** (Colossians 4:16), and we think of Paul telling Timothy to ***“give attention to the public reading of Scripture”*** (1 Timothy 4:16). Today, we usually read on our own; but, back in the mid-90’s AD, most people would ***“hear”*** the word, and so there is a special blessing on those who ***“hear”*** and on those who ***“heed”*** (in Revelation 1:3).

All of this brings us to the next paragraph in Revelation 1, the real focus of today’s study, as John introduces us to God, with an emphasis on Jesus. Let’s look at Revelation 1:4-8,

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 the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood — ⁶ and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father — to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷ BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen. 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 revelation, then, is written by John to the seven congregations in Asia, but the message itself, the blessings of ***“grace”*** and ***“peace,”*** come from God – the God Father, God the Spirit, and God the Son. And this is where John starts communicating comfort. Yes, things seem absolutely terrible. I’m in prison. You are getting crushed by the Roman Empire, things seem to be absolutely out of control, but this message comes from God, ***“from***

Him who is and who was and who is to come.” This message comes from God’s throne room. God is in control. This is a message we need to hear. And as we move into our study of the letters to the seven churches, I want us to look at Jesus the next two weeks.

Earlier this week, as I started working on this, and as I thought about the situation in the world and in the church, I said to my family, “We need more Jesus.” And they all agreed, “Yes, we need more Jesus!” So, I want us to look at Jesus this morning. I want us to look, 1.) at his qualifications in this first passage – who he is; then, let’s notice, 2.) What he has done for us, and then finally, 3.) What he will do. That’ll be our outline for the time we have left today, based on John’s revelation of Jesus in verses 4-8: Who he is, what he has done, and what he will do. We might think of this as being almost like the DEDICATION of a book. Often, when somebody writes, they start with a dedication, “This is why I am writing. This person is my motivation.” And that’s what we see here.

I. We start with WHO JESUS IS.

We might think of this as his résumé. This is who Jesus is. These are his credentials.

A. And the first description (in verse 5) is that Jesus is the FAITHFUL WITNESS.

We know what a witness is. A witness is somebody who not only sees something but is willing to testify truthfully about it. I’ve been in neighborhood meetings when the Madison Police come in and give advice on how to be a good witness. They’ve explained that as police they usually don’t prevent crime in the sense that they sit outside your house waiting for something to happen. But instead, they are usually only called in after something happens. They come in to pick up the pieces and to try to figure out what happened. And in that process, they often start by interviewing witnesses. As citizens, then, they encourage us to be aware. One thing I’ve heard them say over and over again is to try to notice what kind of shoes the person is wearing. People will often take off a coat or a shirt as they run, but they seldom change their shoes. And so a good witness will try to remember the bad guy’s shoes.

Well, Jesus is described in this passage as being a ***“faithful witness.”*** He tells the truth. He can be trusted. The word John uses here is actually the basis of our English word “martyr.” And many have suggested that John does this on purpose here, as he reminds these early Christians that Jesus went first. As a faithful witness, he stayed consistent with his testimony, even to the point of his own death. Even death at the hands of the Roman Empire did not change his story. And so, as we follow the Lord, he is a witness we can trust. He is the first Christian martyr.

B. Also (in verse 5), notice how John describes Jesus as THE FIRSTBORN OF THE DEAD.

Originally, ***“firstborn”*** referred to those who were born first. Over time, though, it was sometimes used as a title of honor. And that seems to be the case here. Jesus was not the first to be raised from the dead, but as the Messiah, his resurrection is the most significant. As our Savior, he went first, and where he goes, we follow. And so, when we are threatened for our faith, we remember that he is ***“the firstborn from the dead.”*** Death has no power over us. Our hope in a life after this one is real. On the other hand, if we don’t believe in the Lord’s resurrection, nothing else matters (as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 15). He is the ***“firstborn from the dead.”***

C. The other reminder we have here at the beginning is that Jesus is THE RULER OF THE KINGS OF THE EARTH.

And remember: This is not the way it seems in 95 AD. From their point of view, Rome is all powerful. Rome is crushing the church. In Chapters 2-3 we'll look at some of that persecution. Those in Smyrna were encouraged not to fear, and to stay strong through what they were about to suffer. They were about to be thrown into prison; they were to be tested; they would have tribulation, and Jesus had to remind them to, ***"Be faithful until death"*** (in Revelation 2:10). In the message to Pergamum (in Revelation 2:13), we read about the death of Antipas, the Lord's faithful witness. In Revelation 6, we read about the martyred saints under the altar crying out, ***"How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"*** It doesn't look good at the time, so John gives the reminder here at the beginning that Jesus really is ***"the ruler of the kings of the earth."*** After the Lord's resurrection, Jesus reminds the apostles (including John), ***"All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth."*** And that's what we see here. Jesus is ***"the ruler of the kings of the earth."***

So, this is who Jesus is: He is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

II. As John continues introducing the Lord, he continues with a reminder of WHAT JESUS HAS DONE FOR US. And this is practical.

A. Notice how John starts towards the end of verse 5 with a statement of praise, "TO HIM WHO LOVES US."

And I want to make sure we don't miss the tense of the verb here. It's not that Jesus "loved us" (past tense), but he ***"loves us"*** – right now, even today, even in the middle of it. Jesus is always loving us, even when life is hard, even when we are separated from our Christian family, even when John is out there in isolation on the Island of Patmos, even as the government cracks down and persecutes the early church, preventing them from meeting together. He loves us! God is love. We are loved by the Faithful Witness, the Firstborn from the Dead, the Ruler of the Kings of the Earth. As important as he is, and as low as we might feel, he is concerned about what we are going through. He loves us as much right at this very moment as he did when he was dying on the cross. As Paul said in Romans 8:37-39,

³⁷ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

B. Not only does he love us, but we also find (at the end of verse 5) that Jesus has "RELEASED US FROM OUR SINS BY HIS BLOOD."

He has released us. We are no longer tied to sin. That bond has been broken. I think of those old movies where somebody escapes from prison, and then they go bring out the dogs, don't they? And the dogs are on the trail, until the bad guy runs through some water. I don't know whether that always works. Hopefully I never find out. I've met one of the dogs in the K-9 unit here in Madison, and this dog traced a home invasion subject through a crowd gathered for fireworks at Warner Park – and caught the guy. But we know the story, anyway, that they

loose the scent when somebody goes through water. That trail has been broken. That connection is no longer there. That's what Jesus did for us on the cross. He broke the connection to the past life of sin. We are free from sin! Through is death on the cross, and in the act of baptism, He has given us new life. We are no longer what we used to be. We are a new creation. We have passed through the water, he has ***"released us from our sins by his blood."***

C. At the beginning of verse 6, John says that he HAS MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM.

Back in the First Century, it was considered a great honor to be a Roman citizen. Paul was a Roman citizen, and it really helped on several occasions. But by the time we get to the mid-90's, many Christians saw themselves as basically living without a country. Rome had turned against them. They didn't belong. Their own nation had turned against them. Their own nation was almost unrecognizable from the Rome they grew up with. John, then, praises Jesus as having ***"made us to be a kingdom."*** As Paul explains in Philippians 3:20, ***"our citizenship is in heaven,"*** and in this heavenly kingdom, we are kings, in a sense. We are royalty. This is a blessing we do not deserve. We think of the twenty-four elders in Revelation 4:10, those men who ***"fall down before Him who sits on the throne."*** They worship, and they ***"cast their crowns before the throne."*** We do not deserve the honor, but he has made us to be a kingdom. How comforting this must have been for these congregations to hear this reminder.

D. The last part of this is that Jesus has also MADE US TO BE PRIESTS.

A priest is a go-between, someone who leads others to God, someone who represents God to the people. As Christians, we are priests, going to God in prayer and bringing his word to the world. And no government can stop that. We show people who God really is. We have access to God directly, and no government can interfere with this. So, Jesus has made us to be priests. This is what he does.

So, we've looked at who Jesus is, we've looked at what he does...

III. ...we close today by looking at WHAT HE HAS PROMISED TO DO.

A. And the first part of this is John's reminder that HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS.

His first coming was quiet – born in a tiny village, placed in a manger, worshiped by shepherds – but his second coming will be the opposite of quiet, as he will be ***"coming with the clouds,"*** just as the angels said he would at his ascension in Acts 1, ***"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."*** He ascended into heaven, and he will come back in the same way he left, ***"with the clouds."***

B. In fact, as John goes on to say, EVERY EYE WILL SEE HIM, EVEN THOSE WHO PIERCED HIM.

Who pierced him? The Roman soldiers! John is telling these people who are being harassed and persecuted by Rome, that every Roman official will see him at his second coming, ***"even those who pierced him."*** It'll be an event that nobody will miss. As I was preparing today's lesson, I ran across several references to something known as "second coming type," a font or a typeface so large that it is said to be used among newspaper editors, only for events like the second coming! We think of those headlines, MAN WALKS ON MOON, and so on. ***"Every eye will see him,"*** John says.

C. And that leads to the last part of this: Because every eye will see him, “ALL THE TRIBES OF THE EARTH WILL MOURN OVER HIM.”

The idea is: Those who are not prepared will mourn. To *“mourn”* is to weep openly and bitterly, with great sadness and regret. For those who are not prepared, it will be too late. And so, the tables are turned. Those who once persecuted the church will be tormented themselves. And then, *“So it is to be. AMEN,”* John says. This will happen. This is the answer to our prayer, when we pray, *“Lord, come quickly.”* He will return, just as he has promised. It’s the picture painted for us a few chapters later (in Revelation 6:15-17), where John says,

¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; ¹⁶ and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

Do we look forward to his return, or are we terrified of it? That depends on whether we are ready for it.

Conclusion:

As we come to the end of this passage, we have just a bit more in verse 8. Who is Jesus? What has he done? What will he do? We have another reminder, *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”* He is everything to us – the beginning and the end – he has always been, he is, and he will always be. The alpha and the omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. We think about the 26 letters of our own alphabet, and we do everything with those 26 letters – all of our spoken and written words, most of us think in the English language, and those 26 little letters can all be arranged and rearranged into books, and messages, and poetry, and pretty much everything. Today, then, when we talk about something “from A to Z,” and we’re saying that it’s all-inclusive. Over here on Stoughton Road, we have “A to Z Rental.” They will rent you everything from A to Z apparently. As I prepared for today’s lesson, I ran across a sermon my dad preached back in 1997, and he referred to the pulpit at the Garfield Heights congregation down in Indianapolis, and the fact that they have the alpha and the omega on their pulpit. Their church has since moved into a brand new building, and we just happened to be there on their first Sunday in the new building several years ago (on our way home from seeing my in-laws down near Dayton). Anyway, I pulled up their livestream this week, and they apparently kept their old pulpit! I don’t know whether all of you can see this, but they still have the alpha and the omega on the front of their pulpit. That’s what John is saying here. Jesus is everything to us. He is the Alpha and the Omega.

And this is where we pause this morning. I’m hoping we can pick up next Sunday morning by looking at the next paragraph as John describes what he sees as he sees Jesus walking around in this vision. As we close, let’s remember that our goal is to stay faithful to Jesus – the one who is and who was and to is to come, the Almighty. Regardless of what our government might do to us, regardless of whether our Christian family might let us down, our goal is to see Jesus face to face and to hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Before John presides at the Lord's Table, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the one who was and who is and who is to come. We come to you this morning to praise you as our loving Father, thanking you for the forgiveness of our sins, and praising your Son as the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth. This morning, we are looking forward to your Son's return, when he will come and take us home, where we will live with you forever.

This morning we are thankful for the good news we've seen this week concerning a vaccine. We continue to ask for your blessing on those who serve in healthcare – we are thankful for their skill and for the work they do, and we ask that you would bless them as they continue to work through the holidays.

Be with us as your people, that we might continue to do good and share, for with these sacrifices we know you are pleased. Be with our nation during these difficult times. But Father, we know that our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly wait for our Savior, the Lord Jesus. We come to you in his name. Lord, come quickly. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com