

## Our First Love

Revelation 1:4b-8

Good morning saints of God. Today is the last Sunday of the church year and next Sunday begins the new church year. The scripture that I just read is a reminder of who God is, who the Holy Spirit is and who Jesus is. The Adult Sunday School just finished a series of lessons where we examined these very questions. One in particular is does the God who created the Universe really love and care for the creatures of this world. John, the writer of the Book of Revelations was convinced that he knew the answer to that question and others.

We live at the beginning of the twentieth-first century and the nations of the world are fighting over authority and nuclear capability, we are frightened by storms, earth-quakes, oil spills, global warming, and widespread destruction of the world's ecology. In these cases, disaster on a scale described as "apocalyptic" has been forecast – the end of the world as we know it – the question reminds, does God love and care for us? John wants to assure us that whatever we face – Christ is the Lord of history – the world will change and will be made new – but Jesus remains "the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End....who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty – who loves us.

John wrote to first-century Christians facing stiff opposition from political authorities determined to stop the spread of the Christian message. In spite of increasingly harsh treatment, they were able to go a long way toward fulfilling the Lord's mandate to take the gospel "to the end of the earth." In fact, within about three decades they had won converts throughout the Roman Empire.

In Revelation, John writes letters from the Lord to some of the churches that were established through John's evangelistic campaign through Ephesus or modern

day Turkey. These were in a special sense *his* Churches, and by speaking to them he sent a message first to those who knew and loved him best, and then through them to every Church in every generation. By the time John wrote the Christians were facing intense persecution under the Emperor Domitian. He extended the practice of emperor worship to demand that all citizens in the empire refer to him as “Lord and God.” He also used political, economic, and social measures to suppress what he perceived to be resistance, including the Christian movement. It was during this period that Christians in Rome began to seek refuge in the catacombs, deep underground tunnels intended as burial chambers for the dead. Internally, many of the churches struggled with poverty, heresy, and dissension.<sup>1</sup>

In light of this, John sends them *grace* or all the undeserved gifts of the wondrous love of God. He sends them *peace*, which one scholar describes as “the harmony restored between God and humans through Christ.” The blessings are him who is and who was and who is to come. This is a common title for God. In Exodus 3:14 the word of God to Moses is “I am who I am.” The Jewish Rabbis explained that by saying that God meant: “I was; I still am; and in the future I will be.” This is what in *Hebrews* so beautifully became: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever” (Hebrews 13:8). In the terrible days in which he was writing John keeps his heart on the changelessness of God. God the Father is the Eternal One (Rev. 1:8; 4:8). All history is part of His eternal plan.

Instead of the Holy Spirit John describes the seven Spirit who are before his throne. This is explained Isaiah 11:2; which states: “The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and piety; by this spirit he shall be filled with the fear of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nelson, Inc.; *The Word in Life Study Bible, New Testament Edition*, 1993, Nashville, 873-881

God.” This passage is the basis of the great conception of *the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit*. The Spirit, as Beatus said, is one in name but sevenfold in virtues. If we think of the sevenfold gift of the Spirit, it is not difficult to think of the Spirit as seven Spirits, each giving great gifts to humans. It is also true that God gives “gifts of the Holy Spirit.” The word translated *gifts* really means *shares*, and has the idea was that God gives a share of his Spirit to every human. So the idea here would be that the seven Spirits stand for the share of the Spirit which God gave to each of the seven Churches. It would mean that no Christian fellowship is left without the presence and the power and the illumination of the Spirit.

When John described Jesus he uses three great titles. First: Jesus is the witness on whom we can rely. It is a favorite idea of the Fourth Gospel that Jesus is a witness of the truth of God. Jesus said to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen” (John 3:11). Jesus said to Pilate: “For this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37). A witness is essentially a person who speaks from first-hand knowledge. That is why Jesus is God’s witness. He is uniquely the person with first-hand knowledge about God.

Second: Jesus is the first-born of the dead. Through his Resurrection Jesus gained a victory over death, which all who believe in him may share. He is also the first-born son who inherited his father’s honor and power, *one who occupies the first place*, a prince among human. When Paul speaks of Jesus as the first-born of all creation (Colossians 1:15), he means that to him the first place of honor and glory belongs. This means that Jesus is Lord of the dead as he is Lord of the living. There is no part of the universe, in this world or in the world to come, and nothing in life or in death of which Jesus Christ is not Lord.

Third, Jesus is the ruler of kings on earth, the long awaited Jewish Messiah. Another scholar says this very beautifully points out the connection between this title of Jesus and the temptation story. In that story the devil took Jesus up into a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth and their glory and said: “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:8, 9; Luke 4:6, 7). It was the devil’s claim that the kingdoms of the earth were delivered into his power (Luke 4:6); and it was his suggestion that, if Jesus would strike a bargain with him, he would give him a share in them. The amazing thing is that what the devil promised Jesus—and could never have given him—Jesus won for himself by the suffering of the Cross and the power of the Resurrection. Not compromise with evil, but the unswerving loyalty and the unfailing love which accepted the Cross brought Jesus his universal lordship.

This passage also reminds us of what Jesus did for humanity.

- He loves us and he set us free from our sins at the cost of his own blood. What Jesus did was to pay the price of buying us out of the possession of sin’s power. Jesus completed this action of liberation in the past on the Cross which is an expression of the continuous love of God.
- Jesus made us a kingdom of priests to God. That is a quotation of Exodus 19:6: “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.”
- Jesus has given us royalty. Through him we may become the true sons and daughters of God; and, if we are sons and daughters of the King of kings.
- Jesus made us priests. Under the old way, only the priest had the right of access to God. When a Jew entered the Temple, he could pass through the Court of the Gentiles, the Court of the Women, the Court of the Israelites—but there he must stop; into the Court of the Priests he could not go; no nearer the Holy of Holies could he come. In the vision of the great days to come Isaiah

said: “You shall be called the priests of the Lord” (Isaiah 61:6). In that day every one of the people would be a priest and have access to God. That is what John means; because of what Jesus Christ did access to the presence of God is now open to every person. There is a priesthood of all believers. We can come boldly to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16), because for us there is a new and living way into the presence of God (Hebrews 10:19–22).

John tells his readers that whatever they are going through there is the God in whom they could trust and whom they could adore.

- He is alpha and omega. *Alpha* is the first letter and *omega* the last of the Greek alphabet; and the phrase *alpha to omega* indicates completeness. This expression indicates that God is absolutely complete; he has in himself what one scholar called “the boundless life which embraces all and transcends all.”

- God is he who is and who was and who is to come. That is to say, he is the Eternal. He was before time began; he is now; and he will be when time ends. He has been the God of all who have trusted in him; he is the God in whom at this present moment we can put our trust; and there can be no event and no time in the future which can separate us from him.

- God is the Almighty. The word for *Almighty* describes the one who has dominion over all things.

In the circumstances in which he was writing, the embattled might of Rome had risen up to crush the Christian Church. No empire had ever been able to withstand Rome; what possible chance against Rome had “the panting, huddled flock whose crime was Christ”? Humanly speaking the Christian Church had none; but if men thought that, they had left the most important factor of all out of the reckoning—

God the almighty, in the grip of whose hand were all things. If we are in the hands of a God like that, nothing can pluck us out. If behind the Christian Church there is a God like that, so long as she the Church is true to her Lord, nothing can destroy her.<sup>2 3 4</sup>

John sends the Lord's letters to seven groups of believers living at the end of the first century. But Revelation is an open letter to all Christians, including those of us who follow Christ today. In John's day Christians were faced with false teachers and the persecution that resulted from a resurgent cult of emperor worship. Revelation challenged them to loyalty to the truth and perseverance under suffering. Today we also face economic and political changes. Will we stand firm and trust God? God who is the eternal, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty!

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<sup>2</sup> Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Revelation of John : Volume 1*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1976 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 27

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Re 1:4

<sup>4</sup>Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:928