**HE HAS MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM AND PRIESTS**

June 16, 2019

Revelation 1:1–8

Key Verses 1:6 “…and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.”

Revelation is the last book of the Bible. It is God’s last word. What began in Genesis ends in Revelation. In Genesis we have the commencement of heaven and earth; in Revelation the consummation of heaven and earth. In Genesis we have the entrance of sin and the curse; in Revelation we have the end of sin and the curse. In Genesis we have the dawn of Satan and his activities; in Revelation we have the doom of Satan and his activities. In Genesis sorrow begins; in Revelation sorrow is banished. In Genesis paradise is lost; in Revelation paradise is regained. But most central, in Genesis the Savior is promised; in Revelation the Savior is preeminent. So, we are in for the journey, back to the future, to see the glory of what is to come as God brings all of redemptive history to its great climax.

Revelation is a long, 22-chapter letter meant to be read aloud as church members gathered to listen. 1:1–8 is the prologue, and many of its ideas are repeated in the epilogue, 22:6–21. This prologue and epilogue are like an envelope around the main contents. In the prologue, the author incorporates elements from both the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament epistles to introduce us to Revelation’s major themes, namely, Jesus is coming again to bring justice and victory for his people. He reminds us of who we are, namely, we are a kingdom and priests. We live in a world full of sin that rejects Jesus and his servants, but by his grace he has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve God. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally today.

Look at verse 1. “The revelation from 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.” The Greek word for revelation is “apokalypsis”; in English, it is “apocalypse.” In our culture “The Apocalypse” has come to be known as the dramatic, final destruction of the world. There are many epic movies about it. But in Greek the word simply means to “reveal,” “unveil” or “make fully known.” In Revelation the author uses a variety of signs, symbols and numbers that can seem overwhelming. But their point is not to confuse us; these symbolic figures and numbers are to reveal or make known what is happening in the world, to make hidden realities visible. They reveal not only Jesus’ final return, but also what will happen to the kingdoms of the world, to people who accept the gospel and those who don’t, and to all the forces of evil.

Look at verse 3. “Blessed is the one who reads aloud 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.” This is the first of seven “blessings” or beatitudes in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7,14). These blessings comfort us with promises of rewards in God’s kingdom and exhort us to live exemplary lives in this dark world. In the early church, one who “reads aloud” the words of this prophecy refers to a Bible teacher or messenger, and those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it are anyone willing to listen. In chapters 2 and 3 believers are called to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” So we should not treat the Book of Revelation as strange and ignore it, but read, hear and believe it. In Greek the expression “take to heart” means to guard, keep, observe or obey. This word is repeated twice in the epilogue (22:7,9) and a total of ten times throughout the book (1:3; 2:26; 3:3,8,10; 12:17; 14:12; 16:15). This means that Revelation is not meant to just arouse our curiosity about the end times; it is meant to challenge us to keep, take to heart and obey God’s truth.

Verses 4–8 are greetings and a doxology. Verse 4a again identifies John as the author, and tells us that he is writing to the seven churches in different major cities in the province of Asia, in modern-day Turkey. They are Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. We will study those seven cities and those seven churches in detail as we get into chapters 2 and 3. They are listed in the geographical order someone delivering the letter would travel through. At this time there were more than seven churches in that area, but John chooses the number seven, to represent fullness. These seven churches are not obscure or irrelevant churches; they are representative of all churches (2:7a, 11a,17a,29; 3:6,13,22). So in a sense Revelation is addressed to every community of believers today, including us.

Look at verses 4b-5a. “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.” John begins his letter by benediction from the Trinity. Here comes grace and peace from the whole Trinity to these seven churches and the true believers in them. So this is a love letter. God is sending you his blessing. The Holy Spirit is sending you his blessing. Jesus Christ is sending you his blessing. All three members of the Trinity are sending you grace and peace.

First God is identified as “from him who is and who was and who is to come.” This is the eternal God, the source of all blessing, all grace and all peace. He is eternal; He was, He is, He is to come, looking at the past, the present, and the future. Our world is full of evil. But God who was in the past and who will be in the future is the God who is still there now, the God who is working in our world today, the God who is still there to hear our prayers, to see how we’re living and to strengthen us with his own presence.

Then John moves to the second member of the Trinity; “from the seven spirits before his throne.” Here seven spirits refer to the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 11:2 is a wonderful statement about the Holy Spirit. “The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him--the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and of might, the spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord.” We have seven aspects of the Holy Spirit. It is the seven-fold ministry of the Spirit.

John takes a little more time with Jesus than he did with the Spirit or with the Father because, after all, Jesus Christ is the theme of Revelation. He does dominate the book. The entire book is a vision of Jesus sent to the persecuted, disheartened Christians in Asia Minor who were suffering immensely. This was to encourage them about the future. The first thing that would encourage them would be that God the eternal One hasn’t forgotten them, but sends them grace and peace. The second thing that would encourage them would be that God the Holy Spirit loves them and sends them grace and peace. He hasn’t forgotten them either. And the third and most wonderful, that Jesus Christ, hasn’t forgotten them. He too sends them grace and peace. Look at verse 5a. “and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Here we find three phrases that describe Jesus. First, he is called “the faithful witness.” In 3:14 he is called “the faithful and true witness.” A major theme in Revelation is being a witness of Jesus (1:9; 6:9; 12:11,17; 17:6; 19:10; 20:4). But Jesus, “the faithful witness,” is the best example of being a witness. He stood against evil, hypocrisy and idolatry and for the truth, and gave his own life to do so. When we stay close to him, we receive grace and peace to live as his faithful witness, holding fast to our testimony even against all the powers of evil (17:14), even to the point of death (2:10,13).

Jesus is also called “the firstborn from the dead.” This expression is a reference to Psalm 89:27, where David is called God’s “firstborn.” In Jewish society, the firstborn was the next head of the family, the one who controlled the inheritance. Jesus, the firstborn from the dead, gives us God’s kingdom as our inheritance. Colossians 1:15 also calls him “the firstborn over all creation,” meaning Sovereign Lord over all things. Romans 8:29 calls him “firstborn among many brothers and sisters,” meaning we are called to be like him, and Hebrews 1:6 says that God brought “his firstborn into the world,” meaning he is our object of worship. As the firstborn, he especially made our resurrection possible (Col1:18; 1Co15:20). In Revelation, Christ the firstborn destroys death (20:14; 21:4) and shares his victory and glorious reign with believers (2:7,11; 20:6; 22:2,3,14,17). Christ the firstborn gives us grace and peace to be faithful to him.

Finally, Jesus is called “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Revelation frequently mentions the kings of the earth; generally, they are evil, and they oppose Christ and his kingdom (6:15–17; 10:11; 16:14; 17:2,14; 18:3,9ff.; 19:18,19). Revelation describes Jesus as “the King of kings and Lord of lords,” whose kingship and kingdom will reign forever (19:16; cf. 11:15). Even though there is evil and injustice in this world, King Jesus will eventually triumph. When we meditate on Jesus “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” we are filled with grace and peace.

As he thinks about Jesus, John breaks out into praise. Look at verses 5b-6. “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 for ever and ever! Amen.” We so easily take for granted what Jesus did for us. We need to reflect on what he has done until, like John, our hearts are filled with his praises. The first reason to praise Jesus is because he “loves us.” He loved us in the past by giving his life on the cross as a ransom sacrifice. He loves us in the present through his deep concern and watchfulness for us, and he will love us in the future by clothing us with glorious resurrection bodies and bringing us to his kingdom. When we experience it, we can’t but praise him for his love. The second reason to praise Jesus, John says, is because he “has freed us from our sins by his blood.” Throughout Revelation Jesus is described as “the Lamb who was slain” (5:6,12; 13:8), and it repeatedly mentions his shed blood (1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11; 19:13). His blood purchases us to belong to God (5:9). His blood sanctifies us and gives us victory over this world (7:14). His blood enables us to serve God and to be faithful to Jesus even unto death (12:11). When we accept his blood, we can’t but praise him.

The third reason to praise Jesus is because he includes us in his reign and in his work. Verse 6a says he “has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.” This theme is repeated in 5:10, “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God…” It’s repeated again in 20:6, “…they will be priests of God and of Christ.” It is the major thesis of the Book of Revelation. Though tempted and persecuted, believers are “a kingdom and priests” who serve God in this dark world. This expression is a reference to Exodus 19:6, where God told the Israelites, “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (cf. Isa61:6). Apostle Peter also told believers, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession…” (1Pe2:9a). Revelation tells us that as believers, we are “a kingdom.” And it repeatedly tells us what this means; it means to reign with Jesus, to share his authority both now and in the future (2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:4,6). Instead of feeling pitiful like marginalized victims, we need to see our true identity in Christ; we are called to reign with him. We are fellow members of the kingdom over which Jesus Christ rules. When Raptors were winning, many people were proud to call themselves, “We the North.” They were proud to be a part of Canada, north of USA. We are also priests in this generation. St. Paul said in Romans 15:16, “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” He saw himself as a priest, and he saw the Gentiles as holy offerings to bring them to God’s altar. When you look at Canadian students, who do you see? Do you see them as godless giants? Do you see them as hopelessly lost? Or do you see them as holy offerings to bring to God? If you see the students as godless giants who will crush you, then no amounts of money, no clever strategy will work.

Look at verses 7-8. “‘Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all peoples on 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.” The second coming of Jesus Christ is a major theme of the Bible. There are over 1,500 Old Testament passages that refer in some way to the second coming of Jesus Christ. As God began history, he will close history by his coming. “Alpha” and “Omega” are the first and last letters of Greek alphabet. In other words, Jesus is “the beginning and the end.” Jesus was at the beginning of all things and will be at the close.

May God give us the clear identity that we are a kingdom and priests who serve him in this dark world. Most of all, through the study of Revelation, may God fill us with praise for Jesus and a vision of his coming.