

“The Alpha and the Omega”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 2

Texts: Revelation 1:4-20; Daniel 7:13-14

Throughout his messianic ministry we see Jesus in his state of humiliation. In the four gospels, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God whose true and eternal glory is hidden by a veil of human flesh. In the Gospels Jesus hungers. He thirsts. Jesus suffers. And he bleeds. When our Lord died upon the cross, we see him in his most humble state, torn and bloody, bearing the wrath of God toward our sins in his own flesh. But the Gospels do not end with the cross and Jesus’ humiliation. The Gospels end with the account of the resurrection, the empty tomb, and Christ’s glorious exaltation. The Christ we meet in the Book of Revelation is not the carpenter’s son. Nor is he the humble and suffering Jesus of Nazareth. The Jesus we meet in the Book of Revelation is the exalted Christ, the Risen and Exalted One who is Lord of his church, King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

As we continue our series on the Book of Revelation we move from introductory matters to the material in the first chapter of John’s vision. As I mentioned when we surveyed the way in which this book has been interpreted, it is sad that so many Christians avoid Revelation because of its difficult and mysterious nature. It is even sadder, perhaps, that so many use this book as a springboard for speculation about the Bible’s relationship to current events. This is a book about the risen and exalted Christ.

Revelation is not a guide for interpreting the evening news. Instead, Revelation depicts Jesus Christ’s victory over all his enemies as the final chapters of redemptive history draw to a close. Therefore, we should not be afraid of what is in this book. Nor should we handle this material irresponsibly by attempting to connect it to recent headlines, as though John predicted every war, earthquake, and global crisis which could possibly befall the human race. John does not do this.

What John does do is describe the on-going struggle between Christ and Satan until our Lord returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. While John may not predict specific future events in exacting detail, he does provide us with a theological explanation of all the wars and rumors of wars, the earthquakes and famines, and those signs of his coming which Jesus called the birth pains of the end (Cf. Matthew 24:8).

Throughout the Book of Revelation John tells the glorious story of our Lord’s victory over all of his enemies. He does so using symbols and visions typical of apocalyptic literature. In apocalyptic writings, the author uses vivid symbols to depict a cosmic struggle between good and evil. In Revelation, the specific struggle is the on-going conflict between Christ and his already defeated foe Satan, during that period of time between Christ’s first advent and his second coming. In other words, John describes a struggle which goes on this very day, even as we go about our spiritual duties and earthly calling.

As we saw last time, Daniel calls the age in which we live “the great tribulation,” while other New Testament writers speak of the age which begins with the coming of Jesus Christ as the “last days.” This means that what John sets forth in the Book of Revelation specifically concerns Christ’s church, and therefore, each one of us who are members of that church through faith in Jesus.

Let us be clear from the outset, that the symbols and images found in apocalyptic literature are not to be taken literally. Rather, they are word pictures which point the reader to the story behind the story. In the

Book of Revelation these symbols are drawn directly from the Old Testament and are set against the backdrop of the Roman empire in the first century. If we want to know why John uses certain numbers, say a “thousand years,” or “seven,” we look to the Old Testament. If we want to correctly understand why John speaks of lampstands, or dragons, why he mentions particular cities and so on, we look to the Old Testament. All this means that the Book of Revelation is God’s commentary upon those redemptive historical themes which have been introduced earlier in the redemptive drama (the Old Testament), but which have not yet been brought to fruition at the time John was given this vision.

Therefore, Revelation is that one book in which God wraps up all of the loose ends of the story. This book gives Christ’s church a heavenly perspective upon our present earthly struggles. Ultimately, our struggle is not against flesh and blood. It is against the principalities and powers who manifest themselves in flesh and blood (cf. Ephesians 6:12).

John opens this book by telling us that what follows is the revelation of Jesus Christ, a revelation which concerns things which must *soon* take place. This is why we should not understand John’s vision as a description of things limited to that time *immediately* before Christ returns as taught by dispensationalists. Rather, John is giving us a vivid description of the entire church age. While each one of his visions tell the basic same story, they tell it from a different vantage points, focusing upon different periods of time within the inter-advental period. Furthermore, what John reveals comes from God through an angelic messenger. The content of this vision concerns Jesus Christ, who is the center and sum of redemptive history. What follows then, is John’s testimony concerning Jesus Christ. It is, therefore, the Word of God. In fact, says John, there is a great blessing here—the first of seven such blessings—for all of those who hear these words and then take them to heart. So as we proceed, let us prayerfully and obediently do as John instructs us. Let us listen and hear. What follows is the testimony of Jesus Christ about himself. And this testimony says John, is certain and true.

As we turn to our the first part of our text (Revelation 1:4-5), we have before us the historical setting in which Christ’s testimony is revealed to John. John’s letter is addressed to seven specific churches scattered throughout Asia Minor (Turkey). This means that Revelation is not dealing with abstract principles, or timeless truths like Aesop’s Fables.¹ This book is written to seven actual Christian congregations, each one struggling with real evil and persecution at the hands of a pagan empire, or with heresy and false teaching arising from within. The struggle faced by these particular churches is indicative of the struggles that Christ’s church will face throughout this present age until the bridegroom comes for his bride at the end of the age.

From the salutation in verse 4, it is clear that the author is well known to his readers (hearers). His vision comes to them in the form of a circular letter. “*John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia.*” The seven churches will be listed for us shortly. Given the fact the author needs no introduction, it is very likely that he is the apostle John. According to Christian tradition, John lived for many years in Ephesus, the first church named in the list of churches to whom this vision is sent. It is believed that John is the only one of the twelve apostles who did not die a martyr’s death, although John was exiled for a time to the island of Patmos, where Christian tradition says he received and recorded the vision we know as the Book of Revelation.²

¹ Bauckham, The Theology of the book of Revelation, 19.

² Beale, The Book of Revelation, 34-36.

As is typical of such epistolary greetings throughout the New Testament, the greeting “*Grace and peace to you*” is given in the name of the Triune God “*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.*” Perhaps alluding to the divine name first revealed in Exodus 3:14 when I AM spoke to Moses through the burning bush, John tell us that God is without beginning or end. He is the Lord of the past, the present, and the future.³ The Trinitarian theology of Revelation also becomes very apparent when John refers not only to the eternal God, but to the seven spirits before his throne, which is almost certainly a reference to the Holy Spirit.⁴

The number seven always signifies completion and perfection in this book, and since these seven spirits are said to participate in extending grace and peace to believers, this cannot be a reference to a creature or an angelic being. The key here is the Old Testament. In chapter four of the Book of Zechariah we read: “*I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold with its bowl on the top of it, and its seven lamps on it with seven spouts belonging to each of the lamps which are on the top of it . . . `This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.*” The Lord’s Spirit is depicted by Zechariah in his sevenfold fullness or perfection. This same language reappears in Revelation 4:5: “*From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.*” In the opening chapters of Revelation, the seven spirits are connected to the seven lampstands—symbolic of God’s presence in the seven churches mentioned below. This explains why these churches are effective witnesses to the world and why that witness ends if the lampstand is removed. This may explain why the Holy Spirit is mentioned by John before Christ in John’s salutation.⁵

But the central role of Jesus Christ is made plain in what follows. It is Jesus whose testimony is given in this vision and his testimony is true because *Jesus Christ . . . is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.* Jesus alone is the one who has conquered death. He is the one who bears witness in this vision. This is significant for John’s reader because of the fact that when Jesus died on Calvary, his messianic testimony about the coming of God’s kingdom seemed to be brought to naught. A dead Messiah is no Messiah. Yet, the same Jesus who died on Calvary also rose again from the dead and is now exalted on high where he has taken his place at the right hand of God as the ruler of all the kings of the earth.⁶ Since the exalted Christ rules over all kings, his rule extends to the current emperor of Rome, even if Caesar refuses to acknowledge it! The knowledge of this would have been very comforting to Christians who lived under the oppressive thumb of that pagan empire which had put thousands of believers to death. For one day even Caesar will, on bended knee, confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

With his thoughts now turned to the triune God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ the faithful witness, John bursts forth with a doxology verses 5b-8.

³ Poythress, Returning King, 72.

⁴ Beale, The Book of Revelation, 189.

⁵ Beale, The Book of Revelation, 189.

⁶ Poythress, Returning King, 73.

In the preceding verses, John has called his readers attention to Christ's kingly and prophetic offices. Now he reminds us of Christ's priestly office. *"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."* This is an important reference point to open this book because ultimately it is human sinfulness and the curse brought upon us because of our sin in Adam that lies at the root of the conflict which will unfold in the pages of this book. The same Jesus Christ who has risen from the dead and whose testimony is true, John says, loves us. Jesus has freed us from our sins by his blood. He has fulfilled his covenant promises in us, his people, since he has made us a kingdom of priests to serve his God and father.

Recall that in the Book of Exodus, the priesthood was limited to certain individuals from the tribe of Levi. But in Jesus Christ, all believers from all nations are priests. We are allowed that intimate access to God which had been limited to Israel's priests. Furthermore, we are now free to participate in that worship of God which is accepted not on the basis of the blood of beasts, but on the basis of the priestly work of Christ, who has freed all of us from our sins. The very thought of this moves John to praise the Savior: *"to him be glory and power, for ever and ever, Amen!"*

But the same Jesus who has loved us, died for us, and was raised for us, will one day come for us and receive us to himself as his bride. Says John, *"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."* John's language echoes here, in part, the prophecy of Daniel 7:13-14, our Old Testament lesson. Daniel writes: *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."*

But John also has in mind the great prophecy of Zechariah 12:10: *"They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and mourn for him as one mourns for an only child."* These two themes, mourning and the glory of the kingdom, coalesce only in one person, Jesus Christ.

A couple of points are worth mentioning. For one thing, our Lord's second coming cannot be limited to God's judgment upon Israel in A. D. 70 as preterists contend. The language John uses is universal, not local. *"Every eye shall see him."* Indeed, in their prophecies both Daniel and Zechariah see our Lord's second advent in connection to Christ's everlasting kingdom, a kingdom which will never be destroyed. This certainly implies the final judgment, the resurrection from the dead, and the re-creation of the heavens and the earth, not the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Roman army. The point is that the crucified one of Zechariah's prophecy, is also that one who causes the nations to mourn. He is also the "Son of Man" of Daniel's prophecy, who approaches the ancient of days and who will now bring terror to his enemies when he comes in all of his glory.⁷ This can only be a reference to the final, eschatological judgment, not to the fate that befalls Jerusalem in 70 A.D., when Israel is left desolate.

This stress upon Christ's glorious exaltation at his second coming, leads John to remind his hearers of just who this coming one is: *"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who*

⁷ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 53.

was, and who is to come, the Almighty.’” There is no stronger statement of the deity of Jesus Christ found anywhere in the New Testament. This is the first of seven such declarations about Jesus Christ in the Book of Revelation pointing to the fullness and perfection of the divine name.⁸ Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, which are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet indicating that not only is Jesus is the beginning and the end, he is also everything in between. This Alpha and the Omega is the Lord God who is now testifying through this vision. Jesus is the one who was, who is, and who is to come. He is the Almighty.

This declaration must be seen against the background of several important Old Testament texts. In Exodus 3:14 God reveals his divine name, I AM. In Isaiah 48:12, the Lord declares, “*I am he; I am the first and the last.*” Throughout this section of Isaiah’s prophecy, YHWH demonstrates his superiority over the idols of the nations, a point which would not be lost to John’s readers suffering persecution at the hands of a pagan empire known for calling its political ruler (Caesar) a deity, the very height of human idolatry.⁹ In this context, we can see John’s declaration as a statement that Jesus is God and that he will come again to establish in its fullness that kingdom of which Israel’s prophets had spoken and which Jesus inaugurated at his first coming. Jesus will crush all idols and those who worship them.

After the salutation, John now discusses his apostolic commission as a prelude to the first vision of Revelation, recorded in Revelation 1:12-3:22.

Confirming the fact that John was well known to his reader, he speaks of himself not as an apostle, but as a fellow sufferer and brother in Christ. “*I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*” Writing from the island of Patmos, which was a Roman penal colony located off the coast of Asia Minor where John had been exiled, like the other authors of the New Testament, John is very blunt in his assertion that Christians will suffer because they are followers of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ As Christ is hated, so too will be those who serve him. John has suffered along with those to whom he is writing. But while he urges patience in the midst of such mutual suffering, he also reminds his hearers that they are all members of that glorious kingdom of which he has just spoken.

In verses 10-11, John speaks a bit more specifically about the circumstances behind the writing of this book. “*On the Lord’s Day,*” which is Sunday, the first day of the week and the day of Christ’s resurrection, “*I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: ‘Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.’*”

There are a couple of things here worth noting. When John tells us he is “in the Spirit,” he is referring to the Holy Spirit who gave John the visions recorded here by transporting him to those vantage points from which they are described. This is a statement which appears again in Revelation 4:2, 17:3 and 21:10 and is used to make plain that the testimony of Jesus comes through the agency of the Holy Spirit. This means that the Book of Revelation is not simply John’s visionary musing, but is in fact, the very word of

⁸ Bauckham, The Theology of the Book of Revelation, 25-27.

⁹ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 53.

¹⁰ Poythress, The Returning King, 75.

God. This is a vision revealed to John, by and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, John hears a loud voice, presumably Christ's. Throughout the Book of Revelation we will repeatedly hear of loud voices, sounds, and noises, indicating that what follows is of great significance and universal in its relevance.¹¹

This is the first time where the seven churches to whom this is circular letter is addressed are specifically mentioned by name. Since we will turn our attention to the seven letters to the churches next time, let me briefly say now that there are "seven" churches, which should immediately get our attention. While some have argued that the seven churches represent seven different ages of church history—the church of Ephesus being the earliest period and the church of Laodicea supposedly being the apostate church on earth when Christ returns—it is much better to see these churches listed in the order in which the circular letter is to be delivered. If you simply look at a map of Asia Minor, you can see that these churches form a semi-circle, lying along the road which a messenger would have used to deliver John's letter to each of them.¹² But the number seven—indicating fullness and completion—does mean that these seven churches and their individual circumstances represent Christ's church throughout the time between his first advent and second coming. Those things for which these local churches are commended and rebuked are things which will characterize Christ's church throughout the entire present age. The issues these churches face are the same issues that we will face until Christ comes back.¹³ Their struggle is our struggle.

In verses 12-20, John introduces us to Christ in his post-ascension glory as John begins to unfold the first of a series of visions which depict the course of the present age. But John does so in a way which moves from his own time and place in the first vision, to things yet to come until we come to John's final vision in Revelation 21-22 which depicts the New Heavens and Earth.

Christ now appears to John and John is undone by what he sees. If anyone needs additional proof that the symbols and images of apocalyptic literature are not intended to be interpreted literally, simply considers what follows after verse 12. "I" (John) "*turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone 'like a son of man.'*" This description comes directly from the Old Testament, specifically Daniel 7:13-14 where Christ is called the Son of Man, as well as from Exodus 25:31, where the construction of lampstands is described in the context of the tabernacle and the acceptable worship of God. The important thing to note is that Jesus is now described as the Lord of his church, who walks among the lampstands, the symbol of the Spirit's presence among God's people and symbolic of the church's function as light-bearers to a dark and fallen world. This is a theme to which we will turn next time when we turn our attention to the letter to the church in Ephesus.

John now attempts to describe what his eyes behold: The Son of Man who "*is dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.*" What Daniel sealed up until the time of the

¹¹ Poythress, The Returning King, 76.

¹² Hemer, The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor in Their Local Setting, 15.

¹³ Bauckham, The Theology of the Book of Revelation, 14-16.

end, has now been opened. Jesus Christ has indeed received that promised dominion from the Ancient of Days.¹⁴ Jesus is that one who has been given “*authority, glory and sovereign power.*” As Lord of his church, “*all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him,*” as evidenced by the presence of these churches throughout pagan Asia Minor. As seen in his his post-resurrection glory, Jesus’ “*dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*”

His robe and golden sash indicates he is God’s all sufficient and final priest. His white head and hair connect him to the Ancient of Days. His fiery eyes and bronze feet echo a number of Old Testament texts in which God’s glory is manifest in fire and metallic objects. The image of a furnace suggests purification. His voice is that of God himself. John says that “*in his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*” The seven stars are explained in verse 20: “*The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*” This simply means that Christ is the Lord of his church. And having seen the risen Christ in all of his glory, John can only do but one thing. “*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.*”¹⁵

Although Christ is now manifest in all of his glory, he remains that tender Savior who has purchased us with his own blood. It was “*then,*” says John, that the exalted Christ “*placed his right hand on me and said: ‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.’*” John will not be consumed by Christ’s glory. He will be spared by that one who has power over death itself. Indeed, the Risen One now gives John his marching orders: “*Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.*” This is exactly what John does by recording the letter from the angel to the seven churches to which this epistle is addressed.

Beloved as we read these words, we too have heard the testimony of John and we know that it is true. We have heard the testimony of the firstborn and faithful witness, Jesus Christ, that one who has loved us and freed us from our sins by his own blood, and it is true. While the gospels show us a humble Christ who must suffer and die to fulfill all righteousness, in the Book of Revelation, John reveals to us the Christ who is “*the Alpha and the Omega, ’ who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.*”

This is the Christ with whom we have to do. He is the Lord of his church who holds the seven stars in his hand, who walks among the lampstands, and who holds in his hand the keys to death and hell. Therefore, let us humble ourselves before the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the Almighty, who is alive forever more. Let us ascribe to him all praise and glory and honor and power as we bow before him this morning in humble faith and adoration.

Amen!

¹⁴ Poythress, The Returning King, 79.

¹⁵ See the helpful discussion in: Beale, The Book of Revelation, 210-216.