

# **Our Identity**

*Rev. David Lipsy*

When you meet someone for the first time, what are some things that person might say about themselves? Most often they say their name, where they're from, or what they do for a calling. Did you ever wonder why people choose that information? Similarly, did you ever notice that if you criticize some people's work, they get very sensitive about that and very defensive? Or perhaps if you say something about their family or church, maybe then they would get sensitive or defensive or even offended? Why is that?

When you get right down to it, people say what they say about themselves and are sensitive about some things and not others because these are issues involving identity—and one's identity is a very important matter. Identity is a critical topic to consider as it tends to have a much greater effect on us—on our attitude and how we process life—than we might realize.

Our identity will be the focus of our consideration. Let us pray to the Lord not only for understanding about this, but also for a right application of this tremendously important matter in our life. The texts we will focus on are Romans 7:17, 20 where Paul writes, "It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me."

We've often heard that we should live our lives according to Scripture; we are to live to the honor and glory of God. How do we really do that? How do we go from reading our Bibles—the histories, the Psalms, the Gospels, the letters, the wisdom books—to actually weaving it into decisions we make, attitudes we have, and words we

speak? Or to put it more simply still, how do we go from the world of Scripture to the everyday lives we actually live? How does the history of Samson relate to my situation today? What about the letters to the seven churches in Revelation? And how do I connect the Proverbs I'm reading with decisions I need to make in my family, in my business, or in my studies? Most Christians have a difficult time doing this, except perhaps for the most obvious commands and prohibitions.

As important as such questions are, there is one matter we need to consider first. We don't undertake a task before discovering what we have at our disposal that would enable or assist us in doing that task. So before we consider how to go about translating Scripture into holy living, it would be good to start by seeing what God has given us to work with and how He has equipped us to actually do this important work called holiness. He has given us His Word to guide us, but He has given us so much more. It is important to know what this provision includes in order to be motivated and encouraged to pursue godliness with our whole heart. We will undertake this chiefly by taking a good hard look at our identity.

### **Who We Were**

Perhaps someone reading this might look at this first point and think, "Not this again! Haven't we heard so much about what we were—the misery, the sin, the depravity—I am more than ready to hear about holy living." Though I understand and sympathize with this sentiment, we need to remind ourselves that God Himself contrasts what we were before He lavishes upon us the encouragements of what we are now through His grace.

Who were we, beloved? This question is not about demographics—ethnicity, place of origin, or upbringing. Instead, God's Word speaks plainly and clearly about who

we were before His grace and Spirit began to work in our lives. You are familiar, no doubt, with the descriptions. No one, of themselves, does good (Ps. 53:3; Rom. 3:12). We go astray as soon as we are born (Ps. 58:3). Every imagination of the thoughts of our hearts is only evil continually (Gen. 6:5). “All we like sheep have gone astray” (Isa. 53:6). “We all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others” (Eph. 2:3). “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). “Dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Let this suffice. The description is thorough, it is deadily accurate, and regardless of how we see ourselves or others, God is telling us in clear terms how He sees us and all mankind through His perfect eyes. This isn’t to say that some of us couldn’t have been God-fearing already in our youth or when we were young. But if that was indeed the case, it was only because that’s when God’s grace met with us.

Now this last statement is a bit of a problem for a great many people. From all appearances, there are lots of good people. Look at charitable contributions, people helping people in all kinds of ways. We all know very nice people who may not even be very religious. So how, many ask, can we possibly believe in total depravity? They would admit some people do evil things sometimes, some a lot more than others—but is everyone totally depraved? Are things as bad as that? They don’t appear so—and that is just the problem.

We may often evaluate what’s going around us as opposed to what God says is going on around us. The challenge with this comparison, of course, is that we don’t have Bibles in front of our eyes each moment. So what we see and feel sways our thinking, If we’re not interacting

much with God and His Word, we will start to question such truths as man's depravity. No wonder the Psalmist wrote, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart that I might not sin against thee" (Ps. 119:11). Daily interaction with God's Word informs our mind and helps us process the onslaught of our senses.

Who teaches toddlers to misbehave or say "no" or throw a tantrum? Do they need training or an example for that? No, they'll do these things all by themselves when their little wills are crossed. If mankind is evolving, as so many claim, why is it that people worldwide are not treating each other better over time? Why can't we seem to learn from the sins and mistakes of generations? Why are there not fewer wars? Less persecution? Is good breaking out all over? Nations coming together in lasting peace? Scripture says God's grace is the only answer to the depravity of man. Only when He intervenes in hearts and minds do swords get beat into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

Let us go with the obvious—that the God of heaven and earth, the living God, the Creator of all, the One who governs all, the One who knows all things, sees all things, including all hearts all motives, who is everywhere—He has the perfectly accurate perspective on what man really is apart from His grace. Depravity must not be measured or quantified in a relativistic ways. God's standards, those that reflect His blessed image, are those against which all must be measured.

Just as the ground is frozen in the heart of winter, so the heart of man is to that which is truly good. What appears good to us often seems so because we have never seen perfection (except in God), so all our comparisons are relative. Additionally, we only see the activity, hear the words—we don't see or know the motives or intents like God does. Finally, we've become so accustomed to

sin that the norm for what is good in our eyes tends to deteriorate over time. For example, consider moral norms today with those of twenty-five or fifty years ago. I am not suggesting that former times were the “good old days”; each era had its besetting, reigning sins. What I am suggesting is the threshold of what is considered wrong tends to deteriorate with the passage of time, especially when a culture rejects God and His Word more persistently and blatantly—unless revival interrupts that tendency.

So we have considered, briefly, who we are apart from the grace and mercy of God. For some of us, blessed be God, it is what we were. One of the saddest things I notice is the truly godly, those whom God has changed, tend to think of themselves more in terms of what they were. On the other hand, those who have not really changed tend to think that they’re really not all that bad and are not too concerned about depravity and related matters. But we are not the judge; God is. We will not hold God to account, but He will hold us.

Let these considerations suffice. Man’s natural condition is very bleak despite appearances to the contrary.

### **Who We Are**

Based on experience, my guess is the first point is pretty familiar territory for most of us, theologically. If anything, we’ve heard more than enough about the misery of man. But what we’re about to consider is less familiar and lived out by fewer still. As we turn to the chapter from which we read, Romans 7, we see Paul beginning with a discussion about the law of God. As fascinating and instructive as that is, a careful consideration of that passage would take up more time than we presently have. But in verse 4, God points out through Paul that our relationship to His law changes when we become believers, as does our relationship to God because of what Jesus Christ has done for

us. Verse speaks about what we were before that change. The law shows us our sin, pointing out to us how we should be living, convicting us that we're not living that way. That is a painful and often prolonged experience. Verse 6 speaks of our deliverance from the condemnation of the law so that we might serve our God and those around us in newness of spirit.

Then, beginning with verse 14, we have what is perhaps the most well-known part of the chapter. From that verse through to verse 24, Paul gives us a detailed, intimate look at his own personal struggle with indwelling sin. Many a saint has taken comfort from this heart-level confession because we can so identify with that struggle ourselves. The language is honest and powerful: he does what he hates to do, and the good that he wanted to do he finds himself not doing. In verse 24, he exclaims that this warfare makes him feel wretched, longing, asking when and how he would be delivered from all of this. Then follows the beautiful, God-glorifying answer to that question in verse 25: "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." The words, however, that are so often overlooked are found in the words of our twin texts—verses 17 and 20, "Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me."

Is Paul excusing his wrongdoing? It almost sounds as if he had no choice or that it really wasn't him. But what Paul is saying here and in verse 20 couldn't be more important, beloved! When he writes, "It is no more I that do it but sin that dwelleth in me," he is stating something profoundly encouraging about the Christian identity. This is true about every believer, weak or strong, new or experienced. But to really grasp this principle, we should start somewhere else first.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17 we read, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed

away; behold, all things are become new.” We have heard that being born again a renewal, but Scripture speaks in much stronger terms than this. Second Corinthians 5 speaks of a new creature or new creation. “Old things are passed away; all things are become new.” When the Lord works in our life with His grace and Spirit, He not only gives us spiritual life, not only forgives our sins through faith in Christ, but He also changes us in demonstrable ways. This is significant! Notice that in verses 18–20 of Romans 7, Paul contrasts what he calls flesh with his new identity. He no longer considers himself flesh; this is no longer his identity. He no longer is the old man. He is also not some hybrid of old and new man. Instead, “[i]t is *not* I but sin that dwelleth in me.” This is what John writes about in 1 John 3:9: “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin.”

So what then was Paul struggling against in Romans 7? He describes it in different epistles as the “old man,” “the flesh,” “the body of sin.” Yet Paul does not identify himself by any of these. Rightly understood, these are remnants of the former life of the believer, a life that was crucified when Christ died on the cross. “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom. 6:6). These are aspects of a lifestyle that the new man, the new woman, is to put off. “That ye put off concerning the former conversation [lifestyle] the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” (Eph. 4:22). Dear believer, you are not the person you once were. You must not identify yourself nor think of yourself in that way anymore. That is no longer you. Let’s pause a moment to explore this principle even further.

When we are born again, the faculties which had been corrupted by the Fall and by our own sins are renewed in a most wonderful way. Describing this new man in

Ephesians 4:24, Paul writes, “Put on the new man, which after God (i.e. after God’s image) is created in righteousness and true holiness.” In Colossians 3:10, we read, “And have put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him,” again meaning after God’s image. Think of it, beloved: recreated in righteous, true holiness, renewed in knowledge—what a wonder this is!

Adam and Eve had righteousness, true holiness, an unfallen and true knowledge, an unrestricted walk with God, and vision for the glory of God in everything in creation. We lost all of that and were left with tattered remnants of what we once were. But see what God has wrought, beloved, through Christ Jesus and the wondrous work of the Holy Spirit! We are recreated after God’s image again by His grace. We are once again made holy, consecrated to the glory of God, to His service, and to the service of others. We are once again set apart by Him for Him! We are again made righteous—not only made right with God through the life and death of Jesus Christ, but by His grace we begin to live righteously. We live now with a deep desire to keep all of God’s revealed will. We are once again renewed in knowledge so that we see life and the world around us clearly, even as He describes them in His Word. We begin to receive knowledge of those things which are most needful and delightful, things to which we are blind by nature.

In terms of this new man is how Paul the believer identifies himself. Our forefathers wrote of this new man in the very same way. Consider this excerpt from Head 3–4, Art. 11 of the Canons of Dort:

But when God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect or works in them true conversion, He not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them and powerfully illuminates their mind by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things



of the Spirit of God; but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit, pervades the inmost recesses of the man; He opens the closed, and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will, which though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions.

Art. 12 continues in the same vein:

And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation: a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid.... Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence, becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent, by virtue of that grace received.

Such descriptions are good news indeed for sinners so fallen as we all are by nature! And this description is you, beloved, if you sorrow because you see the ugliness of your sins and how they offend God, and if you turn with desire and need to the only Savior Jesus Christ, leaning all the weight of your sin upon Him, trusting in Him alone. It is not necessary to identify the moment of regeneration. We look elsewhere for our confidence, even to the Savior, Jesus Christ. He is all our hope and salvation.

“It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.” Even though Paul embraced this blessed identity, it did not prevent him from lamenting, in this very same passage, over remaining sin that clung to him. This will be our experience as well, beloved, if we’ve truly become a new creation by the grace of God. We face a lifelong battle, punctuated by His commands for us to “[m]ortify, therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence and

covetousness which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). “[A]s strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11). “Put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” (Eph. 4:22). We are in a war and we need all our wits about us, every ounce of strength devoted to the King and His kingdom, even as we pursue our daily callings.

With all of this in view, it is important that we keep in mind two cautions.

First, because the Lord endowed us with such gifts and graces and has empowered us to be the sons of God (John 1:12), He fully expects us to use these renewed faculties for His glory, for the putting off of any sinful patterns from the past, for the putting on of Christ in each aspect of our daily walk with God, and to battle hard against temptation.

The second important reminder is that, despite the wonderful changes God produces in us, we still need Jesus Christ every day in order to walk in a Christ-like manner. John 15:5 is still as true today as it was day Jesus spoke it. “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.” God’s firm and unwavering determination is that His Son should receive all glory, not only for our salvation, but also for our sanctification as well. He does not regenerate us, forgive us, wash us from our sins, make us new creatures with renewed faculties, and then let us work the rest of our Christian life out ourselves. No, beloved, we are to abide in Christ. We are to walk with Him in prayer, commune with Him through daily interaction with the Scriptures, call upon Him at each twist and turn in our daily life situations, look to Him for strength, call out to Him for wisdom, cling to Him when we’re struggling, rejoice in Him for who He is for us

and how He loves us still. And the present life with Him is just the beginning. “If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (vv. 31–32, 35, 37).

Our identity is secure. It is not based on our work, on our performance, on our holiness. Our identity is Him, Jesus Christ. Our identity is firmly rooted in His love, in His grace, in what He has done and not in ourselves. “For to me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” “He hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father” (Rev. 1:6, 5:10).

Seeing we have this confidence from Him, how then should we live unto Him? To start with, let us not live as defeated slaves of sin and evil. Yes, we do fail. We do sometimes groan over our remaining sins. But let us stop identifying ourselves as failures, as sinners. “It is not I, but sin that dwelleth in me!” As believers, we are not fighting with ourselves; we are fighting against our former self, the remnants of what we once were. We are laboring, warring against the slowly-dying patterns of life that once held us fast in the chains of spiritual death. But no more! “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?... Our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom. 6:1, 6). We are royalty, beloved. Let us live as such. We are servants and handmaidens of the most high God; Let us serve Him as such. Let us, with His help, put on the armor that He has given us in His Son,

employing to the full every renewed faculty with which He endowed us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith! "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph. 2:10).

If you are not looking to, leaning upon, crying out to, and trusting in Christ; if you do not sorrow over your sins, repenting over them to God; then you are missing so very, very much! Repent of your deplorable state, your desire after sin, your prevailing slothfulness regarding spiritual matters, your neglect of so great a salvation and so great a sanctification as this! Will you not know these things for yourself, but instead cling to the weak and beggarly elements of this world and the paltry little it offers? Come away to the side of the King and quit the service of the evil one! Taste and see that the Lord is good and know what it feels like to have the newness of spiritual life coursing through your veins! In the multitude of subjects is the King's honor; will you not be one? If not, you will certainly know His just wrath and wish to all eternity that you had never heard the gospel or, for that matter, this message.

Let us conclude with these words from Psalm 37: "Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday. Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him," for Christ's sake.

# A True Healthy Heart Program

*Rev. David VanBrugge*

*Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.*

—Proverbs 4:23

Our society is working hard at getting rid of heart disease, and for good reason. Heart disease accounts for about twenty-five percent of all deaths in America, and each year 600,000 Americans will die from heart disease. There may be some here who are concerned about their heart health because heart disease is in their family.

This text tells us that every Christian is commanded to maintain a true healthy heart program. We see this in three ways:

- 1) It is required by God;
- 2) It is needed by people;
- 3) It is to be applied in life.

## **Required by God**

As we turn to Proverbs 4, it is important to recognize where our text is in the book of Proverbs. The first three chapters of Proverbs have exalted Wisdom as a divine gift and human goal, giving guidance for life and relationships. Chapter 4 contains the wise instruction of a father, followed by the cautions of chapters 5–7 against adultery and dangerous promises and laziness. It is important to sense the urgency of chapter 4—“hear, my children” (v. 1); “receive my sayings” (v. 10); “give attention to my words” (v. 20). In many ways this is the covenant Father speaking

to His covenant children—“get wisdom” (v. 5). In order to guard against sin, the Father is saying, “Follow My Word. Find Jesus, true wisdom; He has come that you may have life, and that you may have it more abundantly.”

That is why God says in our text—“keep your heart!” But what is your heart? There is often confusion about what the biblical heart is. Simply speaking, your heart is your mind, emotions, and desires. Surgery cannot see or touch this heart. It is immaterial, but it is real. All of your thoughts, discernments, decisions, plans, purposes, affections, attitudes, actions—all are fueled by and driven by your heart. So when we read in Genesis 17 that Abraham “said in his heart...,” this was something he was thinking.

The spiritual heart makes man different from the animals. Because you have a heart, you are responsible. We are commanded to love the Lord our God with all of our hearts, meaning, all of our mind, emotions, and desires. And yet, because of sin, we know that the natural man’s heart is enmity against God. It hates God. So when God looked at the world in Genesis, He saw that every thought in the heart of man was evil continually. That is why there are many warnings about the heart in the Bible: we are to avoid a double heart (Ps. 12:2), a hard heart (Prov. 28:14), a proud heart (Prov. 21:4), an unbelieving heart (Heb. 3:12), a cold heart (Matt. 24:12), and an unclean heart (Ps. 51:10).

But the Bible also reveals that the heart can be changed. To people who are truly repentant, God has promised to take the stony heart of sin away and give us a tender, working heart of flesh. Then our hearts will be willing and ready. Then through the Holy Spirit, we will have minds, wills, and desires that love and desire communion with God.

And so, as we come to our text, this is not just Solomon admonishing his son; the covenant Lord is saying, “Keep thy heart.” This passage supposes a renewed heart

through regeneration, a work of grace in the heart. This heart is a precious gift of God, and now He is saying, “My children, hear the instruction of a Father. Be attentive to these words: keep thy heart!” This is a command, an imperative. This is not an optional feature of the Christian life. You must do this.

But maybe you are thinking, what is God requiring? What does it mean to keep my heart?

First, to keep your heart begins with watching what goes on in your mind and emotions. It is reflecting on what you are doing and thinking. It is being alert to your motives. It is asking yourself, Is this right? Is this what God wants? Keeping your heart is telling yourself what Jesus said to the disciples: “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation” (Mark 14:38).

Second, to keep your heart is to remember what God has done and shown and taught you. When Moses had to command the children of Israel after Exodus and prior to their entering the Promised Land, he told them: “Take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life” (Deut. 4:9); and “Thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no” (Deut. 8:2). Recall what you used to want and how God delivered you and tested you (Jer. 17:9, 10).

Third, to keep your heart is to trust God and His promises more than your own thoughts, or even the thoughts of others. God is the one who sees and knows everything. So when something crosses your mind that makes you doubt or sin or have no faith, you must stop thinking those thoughts, pray, and trust. Though we have

been made new and need to live in that fullness, we need to walk obediently and in faith every day (Prov. 28:26).

Finally, to keep your heart is also to guard your heart—to preserve it, to cause it to be safe. Keep the sayings of Wisdom in the midst of your heart. “Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart” (v. 21). Do this by using the means of grace. Focus much of your reading on the Word of God, for He can discern the thoughts and intents of your heart.

But this keeping is not like building a fence, which you build and then leave it alone to do its job. This keeping is not just a one-time activity. Our text says it must be done “with all diligence.” “All diligence” means we must keep our heart by caring for it, giving attention to it. Proverbs 4:26 uses the word “ponder” to describe a similar activity. It just means to stop and think about it. Take your spiritual pulse. “Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them” (Deut. 11:16).

“All diligence” means we must also keep our heart by disciplining it. Not in the sense of punishment, but in the sense of hedging to keep danger out. Like someone in a healthy heart program, it means being strict with your diet. Be consistent and firm with yourself and boundaries. “Do not let God’s sayings depart from your eyes” (v. 21); “Put away from you...look straight ahead” (v. 24); “Turn not to the right or to the left” (v. 27). “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21). If wisdom is your treasure, there will your heart be also.

“All diligence” also means we must also keep our heart by giving it priority. Physically, your heart matters more than your toenails. In the original, the phrase translated “with all diligence” actually comes first in the text. It could be translated, “More than all guarding, guard your heart!” Above everything else, guard your heart.



The Bible does tell us to keep our eyes (Job 31:1), keep our tongues (Ps. 34:13), keep our feet (Eccl. 5:1), but here it commands us to, above all else, keep our hearts.<sup>1</sup>

We often spend energy on guarding, protecting, and disciplining our children, our money and budgets, our schedules, our diets and exercise routines, our rules and procedures. But are we guarding and disciplining our own hearts? Our minds, wills, and desires? How can we do this? My friends, we cannot depend on our efforts at discipline. We are absolutely dependent on God's grace and gifts to us. But while the power to do this is from God, the duty to do it is ours. As one Puritan said, "Though to keep the heart be God's work, our efforts are his instrumentality."<sup>2</sup> As Christians, we are to be faithful stewards of what we have been given. If you are a believer, God has given you a new heart; guard it! Guarding your heart brings glory to God. This is for Him, His honor, and His glory. Are you guarding your heart, your mind and emotions, for the honor of God?

This command to keep your heart is also a calling to unbelievers. You cannot keep the heart you have; you cannot protect the life in your heart because it is still dead. You need a heart transplant. Your cry cannot be for grace to keep your heart; it needs to be for grace to enliven your heart and for the heavenly Physician to do heart-replacement surgery in you. And yet the wise words of Solomon and the greater-than-Solomon speak to you: Pay attention to your heart. If you truly observe your mind and thoughts and take record of your words, you will see that you are living in hatred against God and His commandments. Guarding your heart will keep you from growing harder yet.

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1. Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, Prov. 4:20–27.

2. Charles Bridges, Quoted in W. Harris, *Proverbs*, The Preacher's Complete Homiletic Commentary (Toronto: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1892), 65.

This command also speaks to those who think they are set because they come to church, dress properly, read good books, and don't say bad words. But God does not want your self-righteous activities; He wants your heart. The outside of your body can be decked out beautifully, but God wants the heart. Jesus Himself dismissed the well-clothed Pharisees by saying, "This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Mark 7:6).

Christ Himself said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." "My son, my daughter, if you love Me, keep My command to guard your heart!" Why?

### **Needed by People**

Our text continues: "...for out of it are the issues of life." This is true physically as well. Because our heart pumps blood throughout the body, we can move and think. Our heart valves and arteries and veins keep the blood going where it needs to be. If the heart is healthy, the benefit is felt in the extremities of the body; if it is diseased, the whole physical frame suffers.<sup>3</sup> But what does it mean spiritually that out of the heart flow the issues of life?

It does not mean that if we guard our heart and do not do this or that then we will be better people. It does not guarantee that you will have more prosperity than your neighbor down the street. It does not mean that you will be blessed with children and a strong family. Keeping our hearts does not earn us salvation, or even favor in God's eyes. The new birth is all a work of grace—unmerited favor because of what Christ has done. But once we have been given that new heart, our greatest desire and struggle becomes keeping the heart close to God.

When our text says that the issues of life flow out of the heart, it means that our heart is the source of our behavior and decisions. It's like a fountain: what comes up

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3. W. Harris, *Proverbs*, 63.

from inside is what bubbles out. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things” (Matt. 12:34–35). Look at the next few verses in Proverbs 4: we are told to put away a deceitful mouth, fix our eyes, and watch the path of our feet. So often, what our heart loves, our ears will hear and eyes see. Consider how your children can always seem to find the particular ice-cream shop or toy store they like. Our hearts are the source of our behavior.

Second, we need to keep our heart, because it is the direction of behavior and experiences. Positively, this can be seen in Deuteronomy 30 where Moses is instructing the people, “If you obey,...the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.” Your guarded heart will lead to life. This was also true for Solomon; his prayer was for an understanding heart to judge God’s people and discern between good and bad—and he was given more wisdom than all before him (1 Kings 3). But it is also true in the reverse. Like Rehoboam, if you do not give your heart to seek the Lord, you will live a life of evil.

When asked why we did something, a common answer is, “I never thought about it.” We really mean that we did it but never stopped to reflect on what it meant. That is why people need to guard their heart. It helps us reflect on the direction of our lives.

Third, we need to keep our hearts because it brings the benefits of behavior and experiences. If you had heart disease and followed your doctor’s orders, it would enable you to do more, see more, and humanly speaking even live longer. Guarding your heart does bring benefits. A

godly heart produces godly living. As John Flavel has said, “What health is to the heart, holiness is to the soul.”<sup>4</sup>

Keeping your heart will humble you because of the evil that is still in your heart. It will bring you to earnest prayer and supplication: “Cleanse thou me from secret faults, Lord!” Maybe you’re struggling and wrestle with the thoughts of your heart, and you are afraid to say, “I love the Lord” because you still feel so much sin in your heart. My friend, that is the struggle of faith, and that is why this command comes to keep your heart, so that you will see more clearly and be more assured of His love to you. Matthew Henry says, “We must maintain a holy jealousy of ourselves, and set a strict guard, accordingly, upon all the avenues of the soul.”<sup>5</sup>

Guarding your heart will confirm and reinforce faithful communion with God and help us to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Keeping your heart brings assurance, as God will never reward spiritual laziness.<sup>6</sup> Guarding your mind and emotions brings spiritual fruitfulness. It will guard you from sin and temptation, and give greater focus and joy in your Savior. It will increase your love. It will strengthen your faith. It will encourage you to persevere. Serving Him with all your heart will help you remember what great things He has done for you (1 Sam. 12:24).

Fourth, when you keep your heart, it also witnesses Christian character and behavior. It keeps from real hypocrisy. It makes your conversation sparkle with spiritual beauty. Guarding your heart also preserves the integrity of your Christian witness.

You cannot eat only processed and greasy foods every day and expect your physical heart to keep working

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4. Flavel, *Keep Thy Heart*, 14.

5. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), Prov. 4:20–27.

6. Flavel, *Keep Thy Heart*, 32.

properly. You should not say your spiritual heart is working properly either if you allow all manner of junk into it. What are you letting in your eye-gates and ear-gates and imagination that is tearing your defenses down? No one wants to suffer from spiritual arrhythmia: “Our lives will be regular or irregular, comfortable or uncomfortable, according as our hearts are kept or neglected.”<sup>7</sup> The comfort of your soul, and blessing to the rest of your spiritual body, depends on it. If we neglect our hearts, our hearts grow cold and distant and our love, patience, joy, kindness, gentleness, and self-control seem to shrivel.

So my friend, if you are struggling and confess it is dark and confused, you need to ask yourself—have I guarded my heart? Have I protected the source and well-spring of my spiritual life? It may be that you have let enemies into your heart. It may be that your spiritual arteries are clogged with the cares of this world. The Word comes to you tonight: “Keep thy heart with all diligence.” This is a command that leads to self-examination—not before men, but before God. Are you keeping your heart?

### **Applied to Life**

Reading about the necessity and benefits of a healthy heart program is not enough; you need to do what the program dictates. Likewise, this spiritually healthy heart program is one that is applicable for every Christian, in all times of life. However, there are particular times when guarding your heart is even more necessary. I want to briefly address seven of these times.

First, guarding your heart is especially necessary in times of prosperity and success. It is necessary because our success tends to blind us to our real condition and temptations. So when you have a good report card, guard your heart. When your bonus comes in, guard your heart.

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7. Henry, *Commentary*, Prov. 4:20–27.

Remember, earthly things clog the way to heaven; there are temptations of pride and self-reliance that come with prosperity and good numbers. God does not judge people by their prosperity, but by their heart.

Second, guarding your heart is especially necessary in times of adversity. When something we think of as bad happens, our hearts tend to question God, wonder and doubt, and assume things.

When you get a poor health report or are in an accident or lose a friendship or lose your income, remember God's providence; He has ordained it. He did not choose you because you were doing well. He will not reject you because you are experiencing adversity. Remember how Jesus, after His resurrection, appeared to the eleven and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they did not believe and were so focused on their perceived trial. Your wandering heart hurts you more than God's affliction on you.

Third, guarding your heart is especially necessary in times of want. When our resources run low, we often distrust the fountain of all good. This is true financially and materially. It is true emotionally and physically. It is also true spiritually. Remember that many of God's children have had very little materially. In the big picture, missing some earthly comforts is better than missing Christ; this want is nothing compared to the want of any grace in eternity. Also, remember that God the Father is willing and able to provide everything you need for soul and body. Guard your heart against thinking otherwise.

Fourthly, guard your heart especially when Satan appears and tempts. Remember that one of Satan's greatest strengths is his subtlety. He will come to you where you least expect him. He will tell you that you deserve this pleasure; he will tell you this can be done in secret; he will tell you other Christians have done this. Guard your

heart by remembering that Satan wants to destroy you and have you defame your Lord. But also remember that Jesus Himself was tempted by Satan and had to rebuke and resist Satan through Scripture. Recall Scripture to evaluate your thoughts and motives.

Fifthly, guard your heart by committing to not be like the world, and by seeing recreation as from God and for God. Satan often allures in times of rest. You have all heard the phrase “Idle hands are the devil’s tools.” There is an element of truth in that not just for society, but also for God’s children. Satan wants you to think that the rules change when you have “down time.”

This is not a command to be busy all the time. But, as you go on vacation, as you spend extra time with friends, as you relax—guard your heart. Guard your heart by committing to not be like the world and to not see recreation as from God and for God. On vacation, read your Bible, pray, do devotions, have family worship. When socializing, remember that everything you have and are is from God. As you relax, remember you are to love the Lord your God with all of your mental, spiritual, and physical energy. God never says, “Take the summers off.”

Sixth, guarding your heart is more necessary in times of drawing close to God. You may think that is strange. But consider two scenarios: First, you need to guard your heart when seeking God. Scripture says many times to seek Him with all your heart. Never dismiss convictions. Second, consider how hard it is to stay focused in prayer and meditation. Even when in prayer in times of need, your mind and emotions tend to get distracted by other things.

Guard your heart by setting time apart; by speaking your prayers quietly; by singing; by giving yourself a space where other things will not distract your eyes, your ears, or even your nose. Remember that when you come before Him, you are approaching the Holy Lord. Guard your heart.

Seventhly, guarding your heart is especially necessary in times of approaching death. Satan often makes final attacks against those ready to cross into glory. He wants you to fear and doubt, and forget the promise, “When you pass through the waters I will be with you, and the rivers will not overflow you” (Isa. 43:2). Dear saints, guard your heart by recalling how death is harmless to God’s people; it is necessary to meet your Creator and Redeemer; the happiness of heaven begins immediately after death; the things of earth are no reason to stay behind. What did Jesus say to the disciples? “Let not your heart be troubled...I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:1–3).

Doesn’t that bring us to where we need to be? We need to keep our hearts. But no one ever says they’ve achieved it. If we know our hearts, we all need the Keeper of our Hearts, too. We need Jesus for new hearts. We need Jesus for the grace to persevere. We need Jesus for the grace of discernment. We need Jesus for strength to fight the Devil. We need the Lord to bless us in prosperity. We need our King to protect us in adversity. We need the water of life to supply our needs. We need the Word of God to resist temptation. We need the Savior to supply our rest. We need our heavenly Intercessor as we draw close to Him. We need our Resurrected Redeemer as we approach death. We need Him.

Society says we can preserve and strengthen our own lives through a healthy heart program. According to the doctors the rules are simple: get plenty of exercise, have a good and balanced diet, and keep your heart free of drugs and other substances. And we need to do those things.

But God’s Word tonight says we need a heavenly Physician. Only He can provide that healthy heart. His grace preserves that healthy heart. Our heart needs to



be exercised under His care, be supported by a good diet of His Word, and be free from harmful, sinful influences. “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). Therefore, my friends, “keep your heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” May God bless His Word. Amen.

# **A Salutation from the Throne of Heaven**

*Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

Revelation is a book that, by Christ and His Spirit's grace, should be read, opened, and understood by all believers. Revelation 5:5 says, "And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof." This book is a revelation from God to Jesus Christ for us. Our Lord Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, is our Savior who shed His blood for us. As head of the church, Christ sent the Book of Revelation via an angel to His servant, the apostle John, so that he could write it down for believers in all ages.

Let us look at the opening words of salutation in Revelation 1:4–8. Though sometimes, when we begin a book, we are able to skip over the introduction quite easily, with Revelation, if we are to understand things properly, we must begin at the beginning where God explains to us what this book is all about and what its purpose is:

*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. 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. 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.*

### **Revelation's Historic Setting**

We have already looked at the theological setting of Revelation. Now, let us consider the rich salutation, doxology, and promise that preface this book. The salutation reminds us that we are reading an epistle or letter. In verse 4, John identifies himself as the writer and addresses it “to the seven churches which are in Asia.” In verse 9, John relates the circumstances in which this letter was written: “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.”

In verse 11, we are reminded that John only served as a scribe, acting on the instructions of Jesus Christ. John is told to write what he sees in a book and send it to a circuit of seven local churches in the Roman province of Asia, the land known today as Turkey: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos (or Pergamum), Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. During the time of the apostles, letters were addressed so they could be read and passed along to churches along the main Roman road in the province. These churches don't exist any longer, but they certainly did when John wrote Revelation. Church tradition locates John in Ephesus in the later years of his life and ministry, so these churches were familiar with John. They knew him, trusted him, and had read his earlier writings.

These seven churches were experiencing sore persecution. John wrote these letters about AD 95 during the beginning of the first general persecution of the church under Domitian, one of the most despised villains in the Book of Revelation. Many other historical characters may

be found in Revelation, but Domitian was definitely one of the beasts John had in view as he wrote.

Secular writers of the time described Domitian as a savage monster with a “reign of terror.” He often abused distinguished citizens in front of crowds who watched in great fear. He hated Christians and despised the church of Christ. He reigned in darkness, loving the pains and lamentations of people he tortured. He was a beast of a man. He commanded everyone in the empire to call him “Lord and God.” When Christians refused to do so, he persecuted and killed them. Few people so accurately fit the picture of the beast of Revelation 13:11–18 as Domitian.

But Domitian was not the only one who fits Revelation’s description of the beast. Revelation says there will be many false prophets and antichrists. Many have and will fit this description. But, to understand Revelation, you must realize that it first saw the light of day in the reign of Domitian. The persecutions he initiated were some of the “things which must shortly come to pass.” Revelation is not only about future events but also what was already happening in Asia Minor and these seven local churches under Domitian’s reign of terror.

But our understanding of Revelation cannot be confined to the first century. There were many churches in Asia Minor, but John draws our attention to just seven. As a number, *seven* is often used in Scripture to signify completeness. These seven churches represent the entire church of Christ in every age to the end of the world. In the same way, verse 4b of our text speaks of “the seven Spirits which are before his throne.” Only one Spirit of God stands before God’s throne, not seven; but this Spirit is described as sevenfold in the sense of being complete and perfect (cf. Isa. 11:2). Likewise, the church of Christ exists as many churches, in many lands with great diversity, but, as the Belgic Confession says, “This holy church

is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world; and yet is joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit” (Art. 27).

Applying Revelation to the church today should not surprise us any more than viewing Paul’s letters as written to us. We don’t say that the epistles of Paul to the Corinthians, the Romans, or the Ephesians only apply to those specific churches. Rather, we say, “Paul is also writing to today’s church and to me as a member of the church.” Thus, we are to receive Revelation as addressed to the church in every age. This is important to remember, because some modern interpreters say Revelation has nothing to do with today’s church. Others believe that what follows after Revelation 3 has to do only with ethnic Israel and the church of the future in the days just before the world’s end. They lose sight of the church universal, but we believe that the entire Book of Revelation is addressed to the whole church of Jesus Christ in every age under all circumstances.

When John wrote Revelation, he was already in his nineties. Youngest of the disciples, John was the last living apostle. John’s life spanned almost an entire century and now, as verse 9 says, he is in exile on the small island of Patmos, one of several places where exiles were sent, twenty miles off the coast of Ephesus.<sup>1</sup> John was exiled to Patmos by Domitian in the fourteenth year of his reign. As a prisoner, John probably had to work in the marble quarries on this rocky, volcanic, nearly-treeless island. It is little wonder then that in verse 9 he calls himself a “companion in tribulation” with the persecuted believers of Asia.

John says in verse 9 that he is suffering “for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.” This statement can be read two ways. John was exiled as a martyr,

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1. I. A. Sparks, “Patmos,” *ISBE*, 4:690.

or witness, suffering for Christ's sake. But he was also there, in the providence of God, to receive the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus, which he faithfully transmitted to the seven churches in Asia, and, through them, to the whole church of Christ.

The historical circumstances for the writing of the Book of Revelation offer many practical lessons for us today. Let us look at three.

1. *We are immortal until our work is done.* John lived many years for a purpose. Some people who live to the age of one hundred are asked, "What helped you live so long?" Their answers include factors such as diet, exercise, and other aspects of lifestyle. But, what helped John the apostle live so long? Christ still had work for him to do. God ordained that he should furnish the church with the written record of this Revelation of Jesus Christ to complete and close the canon of inspired, inerrant, infallible Holy Scripture. Aged Christians today, Christ is keeping you here because the work He has for you to do is not done. Our time is in His hands (Ps. 31:15). We will be kept alive, safe, and immortal, until our work on earth is done.

2. *Living according to the purpose of God is the best and safest place to be.* On the Isle of Patmos, John's outward circumstances could not have been more bleak. Blasted by the heat of the day and exposed to the cold of night, he was a prisoner and a slave. Yet, there is no trace of resentment or despair in John. He is living by faith, bearing his cross, following Christ to the end. So in verses 9 and 10 the apostle says, "I John...your brother, and companion in tribulation...was in the isle that is called Patmos...I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day."

In the midst of Patmos, John found his way to the altar of the living God! He lifted up his voice to praise his Savior, saying, "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood...to him be glory and

dominion for ever and ever” (vv. 5–6). John loved the Lord Jesus Christ so much that the very mention of His name made him burst into praise. If you have ever been in love, you can understand something of the passion of John. He begins to record the prophecy given to him for the churches, and, in greeting his readers, he invokes the name of Jesus Christ. That is enough to make him lay down his pen and worship the Lord.

So do not pity this old man. Marvel at the grace of God in him. Too often, you and I have to drag ourselves to church to worship or to a prayer meeting as a matter of duty. But this old man has to restrain himself from praising God because he has other important work to do. He must remind himself, “I’m not in heaven yet, so keep going! I still have work to do on earth.” Look at your heart, dear believer, then look at John’s, which explodes with love for Christ.

Living on a remote island is difficult, however, in terms of loneliness. When we’re alone, we have to come face to face with ourselves. That was probably the biggest challenge for John. He is content only because he has Christ. He worships his Savior, yet he still feels the pain of being cut off from fellow believers. He is confined to a lonely island with nothing but the sound of the sea; so, he reminds himself, “I am a prisoner, but Christ has freed me from my sins with His blood. Man has put chains on me, but Christ has released me from eternal sin!” Working in a stone quarry is excruciating work for an old man, but John says, “Christ has made me a prophet, king, and priest. Praise Him!” In the midst of the most difficult circumstances, the old disciple worships God with all his mind and soul.

Some scholars think that the Greek word for Patmos means “to be squeezed or crushed.” Life often brings us experiences that crush us physically and emotionally. What do we do when that happens? Should we withdraw

from others and feel sorry for ourselves? No—we must realize that God is at work. He is preparing other brothers and sisters to help us through times of tribulation, and He is preparing us to help others when they are crushed by life. John knows he is alone for his own spiritual welfare as well as that of other believers. He writes to the seven churches and to us, saying, “I am on this island for your sake.” God is preparing John in his suffering to offer others the comfort with which he himself is being comforted.

God is still emptying this aged believer of self. God has already reshaped John from his rashness when he was first a disciple wanting to call down fire from heaven to consume those who opposed Jesus. He also wanted the honor of being seated at Christ’s right hand in glory (Matt. 20:20–24). God had transformed John from this ruthless, insensitive, and ambitious young disciple into the apostle of love. But God is still working in John; He puts John on Patmos to be alone to comfort him in his loneliness so that he may be all the more able to comfort others, as Paul was (2 Cor. 1:4).

3. *God is sovereign over all things, but He is not the author of sin.* This present life is but a valley of tears, in which evil of many kinds touches us.<sup>2</sup> Every hardship that John experiences is meant to strengthen him. God permits Satan to distress and harm the people of God, but He is not the author of such evil; Satan is. Revelation teaches us that there are worldly and spiritual principalities and powers which are always at war with the church.

John is confined to this rocky island because of persecution that originates from sinful men and Satan, the father of murder and lies; but God can make the wrath of men and the hostility of Satan into a song of God-glorifying praise (cf. Ps. 76:10). Out of the barren island of Patmos comes the beautiful Book of Revelation.

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2. Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 26.



Many of the epistles of the New Testament were written from prison. Besides the Bible, I don't suppose there is another book that has had so much influence against the kingdom of Satan as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The book was written from the Bedford county jail, where Bunyan suffered for many years. Time after time in history, the devil tries to destroy the faith of believers and thwart the will of God, but God makes all these things work together for good to them that love Him, accomplishing His holy purpose for their lives (Rom. 8:28).

The greatest proof is Calvary. Crucifying God's Son was surely the greatest evil that humans ever did. When soldiers came to arrest Jesus, He said, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53). The blackest moment in history was Christ's death on Calvary, but out of that sacrifice God brought the highest possible good—our salvation. On the cross, the Messiah crushed the head of the old serpent, Satan. He washed us in His blood and freed us from the bondage of sin. And He makes us kings and priests unto God:

*He maketh the rebel a priest and a king,  
He hath bought us and taught us this new song to sing:  
Unto Him who hath loved us and washed us from sin,  
Unto Him be the glory forever. Amen.*<sup>3</sup>

### **Revelation's Trinitarian Foundation**

Having surveyed the historical setting of Revelation, let us now look at the salutation itself and the way it bases the whole book squarely on the church's confession of faith in the triune God. On the one hand, the salutation is announced in the name of each Person of the Godhead, that is, each member of the Trinity. On the other, special

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3. Stanza 3 and refrain from the gospel hymn of Arthur T. Pierson, "The New Song" (1874).

prominence is given to the third Person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit.

1. *Its trinitarian structure.* Verses 4b and 5a say, “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.” These words convey the triune God’s greeting to the church of all ages.

Note two important points. First, this trinitarian salutation begins with *grace* and *peace*. I suppose many people think of Revelation as a book of gloom and doom, couched in terms of wrath, conflict, and judgment. They think of fire and brimstone, thunder and lightning, cursing, tribulation, and wrath—anything but grace and peace! But these dark elements are features of a much larger picture. The richer overarching theme of Revelation is the grace of God in Christ and the peace of God that passes understanding. These are seen against the backdrop of wrath and tribulation.

“Grace and peace” is the common apostolic greeting. The words *grace* and *peace*, in that order, summarize the means and the end of the salvation of God. Grace is God’s undeserved love, or, even more strongly, God’s de-merited salvation. Peace flows out of that grace, for peace is the reflection of God’s smile. In our natural condition of sin, God must frown upon us. We are sons of disobedience and our father is the devil. But through the blood of Jesus, by God’s grace, all that changes. God now deals with us not as we deserve but according to the merit of His Son, Jesus Christ. He extends His grace to us as hell-deserving sinners. When God smiles upon us, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ in our hearts and minds.

This greeting is also brought from each Person of the Trinity. We read first, “Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come.”

That is a description of God the Father, as the everlasting and unchanging Jehovah. The ancient name of God announced to Moses from the burning bush was, "I AM THAT I AM" (Ex. 3:14). As the eternal Son, Jesus Christ is also "the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty" (v. 8).

Sometimes we need to be reminded that God *is*, because we live so much of the time as though God *were not*. John wants all believers to understand that the dark clouds of tribulation are about to come upon them, yet they will not be destroyed, because God is the great I AM who was, is, and ever shall be. Nothing is more basic to our faith than to believe that God is, "and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6).

We are told that if any man will come to Christ, he must first of all believe that God is. Jesus says, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). Dear child of God, God not only is, but He is committed to you through the blood of His Son. The God who is "from everlasting to everlasting" (Ps. 90:1), the Lord who does not change (Mal. 3:6)—He is committed to you and to your salvation, through the blood of His Son. There could be no greater grace and no more lasting peace.

2. *The greeting of the seven-fold Spirit.* John also writes in the salutation, "Grace be unto you, and peace... from the seven Spirits [that is, the Holy Spirit] which are before his throne." Some people question whether this verse refers to God the Holy Spirit, since we are told there are seven spirits before the throne, not just one. The verse simply must refer to the Holy Spirit, since nowhere else does Scripture say that grace and peace come to us from any other being than God. Nor can these "seven" spirits be viewed as seven angels or seven seraphim.<sup>4</sup> Rather, as

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4. According to the common understanding of Isaiah 6:2-3, there are only two seraphim attending on God's throne, just as there were

we said already, they refer to God the Holy Spirit in all His fullness, as symbolized by the number seven.

This idea is confirmed in other places in the Bible, such as Isaiah 11:2, a prophecy that Christ as the “Branch of Jesse” will be anointed with a seven-fold fullness of the Spirit. Then, too, in Zechariah, God asks the prophet what the seven lamps of the candlestick signify. God then explains, saying, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts” (Zech. 4:2–6). In other words, the church of God shines in the darkness of this world with a seven-fold fullness of light, sustained by a seven-fold supply of the Spirit of God.

In Revelation 3:1, Christ describes Himself as “He that hath the seven Spirits of God,” a reminder that the Father gave the Spirit to the incarnate Son at the time of His exaltation and enthronement (Acts 2:33), and, as John the Baptist declared, “God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him” (John 3:34). Theologians call this the economic subordination of the Spirit to the Son. Christ has the Spirit completely at His disposal to do His work and will in the church and in the lives of believers.

Finally, Revelation 4:5 offers another reference to the Holy Spirit: “And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thundering and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.” The light of the Spirit shines with seven-fold, or, *perfect* brightness. At the same time, John consistently affirms that the Holy Spirit is one in references found throughout Revelation (1:10; 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 4:2; 11:11; 14:13; 17:3; 19:10; 21:10; 22:17).

But let us go on. John says this seven-fold Spirit is *before* the throne. This, too, is a symbolic way of speaking of the Holy Ghost. As the third Person in the Godhead,

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only two golden cherubim standing on the cover of the ark of the covenant in the most holy place (Ex. 25:22).

within the Trinity, the Spirit is not *before* the throne; He is *on* the throne. However, here in this passage He is *before* the throne. That is because John is talking here about the Spirit as given to Christ and the church. As the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit takes all the work of Christ, including His death on the cross and resurrection, and reveals and applies it to us. The Holy Spirit is thus before the throne in His seven-fold fullness, ready to go out and reveal Jesus Christ to His church.

If we are believers, God has given Himself to us in Christ and put His Spirit at our disposal. God's grace and peace come to us through the seven-fold Spirit who is before the throne. This picture is parallel to the one in Revelation 22:1: "And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb." John sees the Spirit as the river of life that flows from under the throne of God to heal the nations.<sup>5</sup> This is another reference to the work of the seven-fold Spirit of God. The Spirit of God comes to the church and to the heart of the believer as a mighty thundering river from the throne room of God. The glory of being a Christian is that you have a mighty river of life that flows through you and carries you along as it sweeps away the sins of your past.

This salutation is a comfort for John, the seven churches of Asia, the church of all ages, and every believer. The triune God puts His blessing upon all of us. Each Person of the Trinity labors for the salvation of believers whom He has chosen from eternity past to life eternal. Samuel Rutherford thus said he didn't know which divine Person he needed the most, but he loved each of them and needed them all.

God the Father provides salvation for us; God the Spirit dispenses salvation to us; and God the Son merits

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5. As did the inspired psalmist; see Psalm 46:4.

salvation for us. That order is unique. Usually, when you read about the triune God in Scripture, it is in the order of Father, Son, and Spirit; but here the reference is to Father, Spirit, and Son. The reason for that is the imagery of this book, which includes candlesticks, bowls, altars, incense, and fire. These furnishings remind us of the tabernacle or temple of God. Revelation not only presents God to us in the nakedness of His being but also as He dwells within His heavenly tabernacle or temple. John saw God the same way Isaiah did, "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple" (Isa. 6:1).

God is thus presented here as the God of salvation. He is seated on His throne in the Holy of holies. Just outside the throne room is the seven-branched candlestick, which represents the Holy Spirit. Just beyond that is the altar of burnt offerings, symbolizing the atoning death of our Savior. So grace and peace come to us from God who is, was, and is to come; from the seven-fold Spirit; 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." God is presented to us not simply as God, but as the God of salvation, the God of the covenant, and the God who is totally committed in all three persons of the Godhead to the salvation of sinners.

One of the joys of marriage is making a vow of commitment to another and that person to you. It is even more wonderful to view God's trinitarian commitment to us against the black background of Revelation. As believers we are Trinitarian not only in our beliefs but also in our experience of God and salvation. We are Christians because we have come to the Father through Jesus the Son by the Holy Spirit. We are baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We are blessed in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Oh that people

would speak more of the triune God, and exalt Him more as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A biblical experience of salvation is a Trinitarian experience. Our Lord Jesus Christ came to this earth to bear witness to His Father in heaven. Peter said Jesus died, “the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). That is what salvation is all about. It is not to make us Jesus people but to make us *God’s* people. Jesus died, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God. Our experience should reflect that. We should know and enjoy all three persons of the blessed Trinity.

Throughout this salutation, John is saying there is no trial in your life that the triune God is not fully equipped to deal with. He was, He is, and He is to come. He is the seven-fold Holy Spirit. He is Jesus Christ who has faithfully borne witness of God. We may ask how we sinful, broken, fragile sinners can be brought through this sin-sick world to everlasting glory, but John’s salutation provides us with the answer: God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have said with one accord, “Let Us give all Our resources to every single one of Our children to bring them safely through whatever befalls them to Our everlasting glory.”

### **Revelation’s Christ-centered Doxology**

As important as the Trinity is, Jesus Christ is central in John’s vision. Having delivered the trinitarian salutation, John now breaks out in a doxology that centers upon Christ as our Savior (vv. 5b–6):

*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.*

John is bursting out into praise to the One who brings this blessing to us. He does this for the following reasons:

1. *Christ is the faithful witness.* The term for witness in the New Testament is our English word *martyr*. Christians who are experiencing persecution and martyrdom are treading the way that Jesus Christ has already taken. God is thus saying to His people, “You are to follow the example of the Lord Jesus who would not be deflected from obeying His Father’s will.” The great temptation of people who are experiencing hostility, opposition, persecution, pain, and possible death is that they will become so discouraged that they will cease to be faithful. History tells us that this was precisely what was happening to the Christians of John’s day. So here God says that Jesus was a faithful witness who did not turn aside, even from the shameful death of the cross.

2. *He is the first-begotten of the dead.* Jesus Christ is also the firstborn of His Father. As such, He has supreme and absolute authority over all things. He demonstrated that authority in His resurrection by conquering death. He has authority over all things, even death itself. A first-born son ordinarily has younger siblings who follow him. So John is saying here that Christ as firstborn has other brothers and sisters whom He is taking to glory. They too will experience glorious victory over death and all other enemies because Christ has risen from the dead.

3. *He is prince of the kings of the earth.* No matter what world leader struts the stage of human history, imagining himself to be all-powerful and using that power to exhibit his cruelty, the apostle John says that Jesus Christ is sovereign over all. Every king, ruler, president, or dictator who seeks to bear authority is subject to Jesus Christ. John thus issues the warning, “Let all tyrants tremble because Jesus Christ is King, the prince of the kings of the earth, and they shall have to answer to Him for all their crimes.”

4. *He has suffered and died for our salvation.* John now breaks into praise of his Savior, saying, “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” (vv. 5b–6a). John acknowledges that believers will suffer persecution even unto death, but what matters above all else is that Christ has set His love upon them. He has demonstrated that love supremely by washing them from their sins in His own blood.

All of us live with a conscience that accuses us of guilt and shame. But John says we may face even death with peace and grace because God loves us, and nothing in heaven, earth, or hell can change that. Jesus Christ has freed us from our sins by His blood. We are more free in prison bonds than our captors are in their apparent freedom.

5. *He has made us kings and priests unto God.* He has given us the highest and noblest work of serving God as our Father in heaven. The ultimate aim of Jesus Christ is not to relieve us of unhappiness, although by His redeeming grace He frequently does that. His ultimate aim is not even to forgive us of sin. His ultimate aim is to produce an order of royal priests whose work is to serve, worship, honor, and praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

6. *He will come again in glory.* In verse 7, John says, “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.” He is thus assuring believers, “Jesus is coming; He is on His way. Mantled in clouds of divine glory, Christ will return to earth to judge every person who lives or has ever lived.”

With His coming, we will experience a day of perfect salvation from Satan, this evil world, our old nature, and sin. There will be no more tears, pain, sorrow, temptation, night, or death. We will have perfect fellowship with Christ; we will worship Him, serve Him, exercise authority with Him, and reign with Him. We will enjoy com-

munion with our precious Bridegroom greater than what the angels, who have been in His presence for thousands of years, have ever known. We will know Christ, see Him, love Him, praise Him, and glorify Him forever.

When Christ returns to earth, every eye will see Him, even those who have pierced Him with sinful deeds, hard-hearted unbelief, and blatant rejection. Those who are not ready to meet Christ will be filled with fear at His coming. That fear will be justified, for the Lamb's wrath will burst forth on their head. Too late they will discover the error of their ways. Then, as verse 7 says, "all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him." What tragic words those are! All around the globe millions of people reject the Lamb of God. Those unhappy people will weep and wail when Christ returns.

The concluding words of verse 7 underscore this truth. "Even so, Amen" declares the solemn truth of what John declares. A great, collective cry of grief will go up from unbelievers when Jesus summons them to His throne to be judged by Him! Will you also wail when you remember how you have slighted Christ, despised Him, rebelled against Him, rejected His salvation, and refused to live for Him? James Ramsey writes, "Christ rejected, an offered salvation neglected, a day of grace wasted, this is the thing that will give the lost sinner his keenest anguish, and wring from him at the last a bitterer wail than devils ever uttered."<sup>6</sup>

Unless you receive the testimony and authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, you cannot be saved. He is the great prophet of our God. He has come to instruct us. He is the faithful witness, the first begotten of the dead, and prince of the kings of the earth. He is at the Father's right hand in glory, exercising dominion over all things in heaven and

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6. James R. Ramsey, *Revelation* (1873; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 56.

on earth. God has highly exalted Christ Jesus and given Him a name above every name. He is on the throne of the universe and will be there until all His enemies are made His footstool. He says, "All authority in heaven and earth is given to me."

All the resources of that government are committed to our salvation. Everyone whom the Father has given to Christ will be presented faultless before the Father's throne. Christ is committed to that. He rules the world. He controls everything in government, economics, politics, and society so that He might exercise His glory and dominion for the salvation of believers. But now John warns believers that something awful will happen to them. Domitian, the Roman Emperor, will be torturing and killing Christians. It will look as though the end is coming. But all the while, Jesus will still be in control. While it lasts, Domitian's reign of terror will be turned to the profit of every Christian, and in the end Christ will arise and deliver His people from it. "To him be glory and dominion forever and ever" (v. 6b).

### **Revelation's Promise of Eternal Security**

In verse 8 of our text, we read, "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." With these words, Christ Jesus stakes His claim upon history. He puts history in its place, setting it in the context of God's eternal purpose and showing how it is accomplished in Christ. At every point, from start to finish, Christ is Lord of history. He was present at the beginning and is at work through all time in the lives of men, the affairs of nations, the rise of civilizations, and the cycles of nature. And when time has run its course, He will write the final chapter and give final disposition to all things. Christ makes three claims:

First, Christ is Alpha and Omega. In the Greek alphabet, the first letter is *alpha*; the last, *omega*. These two letters take on a meaning of their own. In Revelation 1:8, they are used to define “the beginning and the end” and, in Revelation 1:11, “the first and the last.” *Alpha*, then, has come to mean the beginning, the origin, or the first cause. When John says Christ is Alpha, he is saying that wherever there is a beginning, Christ is there, creating a world, calling a people, gathering a church, and founding a kingdom.

But Christ is also the Omega of history. *Omega* has come to mean the goal at which all things must arrive. It is last in terms of finality, fullness, and consummation. As the Omega of salvation, Christ Jesus will save us to the uttermost. He will finish the work He has begun in us. He who gives you grace to live will give you grace to die, for He is your end as well as your beginning. He will accomplish all of His purposes for you, fulfill all His promises of love made to you, and carry out all His counsels of infinite wisdom for you.

*Christ will complete what Christ begins  
To save from sorrows and from sins;  
The work that Jesus undertakes  
Jehovah Jesus ne'er forsakes.*

Second, Christ is the everlasting Lord. John goes on to say that Christ “is and...was, and...is to come.” He thereby links Christ to time and history at every point, as does Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, and to day, and for ever.” This gives us three great comforts:

- First, Christ’s divine powers and Person never change. The wisdom He displayed in creation, the power and faithfulness in upholding all things, His grace and mercy in redemption—all are eternal and unchangeable aspects of His being.
- Second, Christ’s special qualities as our Savior never change. That includes His love for God, His faithful-

ness to us, His obedience, His compassion for the fallen, and His willingness to receive sinners and die for their salvation. He will ever be our merciful High Priest. If we truly believe this, we can embrace all our yesterdays with their afflictions through Christ by faith. We can yield all our todays, with their formidable obstacles, to Christ with love. And we can face all our tomorrows with fears of the unknown, looking to Christ in hope.

- Third, the comfort that we have in Christ never changes. People change from year to year, even from day to day. That is not true of Christ who was, who is, and who is to come! He is constantly devoted to His Father, steadfast and abundant in His labors, true to His Word, and faithful to His people. Praise God that the Lord of history was and is the same Lord who will come on the clouds as the Almighty!

If Christ is unchangeable as the Son of God, we may submit our lives to Him (Job 23:13–14), set our hopes on His promises (Ps. 33:11), and commit our plans to Him (Prov. 19:21), while expecting eternal blessings from Him (Heb. 6:17–18), believing that He will always work for our good (James 1:16–18). How futile, then, it is to challenge Him, His Word, His people, or Christianity itself (1 Sam. 15:29; Num. 23:19; Heb. 1:10–12, 2:1) when we may live by the immutability of the Lord who is and was and is to come.

Christ is also almighty and omnipotent over history. In our English Bible, Christ describes Himself as “the Almighty” by using the Greek word *pantokrator*, meaning “ruler of all” and in the Old Testament by using *El Shaddai*—“God Almighty.” As *El Shaddai* and *Pantokrator*, Christ wields the very might of God to bring all things into subjection to Himself as God’s anointed king and “governor among the nations” (Ps. 22:28).

Christ is Lord and Master of history, never its slave or pawn. Whatever powers oppose Him, Christ will prevail.

This claim is central to Revelation. Though the power of Christ is contested, He masters all the powers of creation, puts His enemies to flight, conquers the world, establishes His kingdom, condemns the wicked, and brings His loved ones safely home to God.

This is good news for the poor and needy, the oppressed and the downtrodden, and the helpless and the weak. It assures believers who, by grace, trust that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church, for her Head is the Almighty, the *Pantokrator*, who wields supreme power. The Lord of history is Lord over every detail of your life. He has numbered every hair of your head. Christ loves you too much to let you go your own way. He meets your every need every day. Sometimes this is hard for you to believe. You look at the confusion in the world, in the church, and in your own soul, and nothing makes sense. It seems like Satan is lord of all rather than Christ. But that is not true. Christ as *El Shaddai* and the *Pantokrator* is still building His church. Sinners are still being saved and saints are still growing in grace.

Though the battle wages between our *Pantokrater* and His archenemy, Satan, Christ is mightier than Satan, for He is God. In the holy warfare that transpires every day in the world, in the church, and in your own soul, we should not expect a life of ease. Even though the church often looks like a messy building site that includes piles of bricks and boards, ugly trenches, waste, rubble, and scattered tools, Christ is still building the church. He promises, “I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Before complaining about the messiness of the church, we should consider the growth process of every believer. Every one of us is under construction. Some of us not very impressive; we have a long way to go. Our faith may be true, but it is not strong. Even after being a Christian

more than forty years, I am ashamed at how easily I can stumble into sin. But my hope is that my Savior, who came in the fullness of time to suffer and die for me, who rose from the dead to justify me, ascended into heaven to intercede for me, sent His Spirit to work salvation in my soul, and even now preserves me day by day is *the Almighty*. He is Lord of all history, but He is also the Lord of your own personal history. So as surely as He will bring this world to perfection in the Great Day, so He will bring me to perfection as a believer. He who has begun a good work in me will finish it. When He comes again, I will be His finished product.

We may have things in our lives that have deeply broken us. We carry many burdens and wounds. People forget that we have these wounds, but we are still struggling. How can we find the strength to live for Jesus Christ in a world like where sins seem to multiply? The answer is that Christ is *El Shaddai* and *Pantokrater*, the Almighty, who can sustain us both in this life and that to come. He is our eternal security.

In closing, let me ask you if you have received the Lord Jesus Christ as the faithful witness. No one can be saved apart from His testimony. No one can be saved without believing and appropriating what Jesus said about Himself, about God, and about you. Hear what He has to say about the way of salvation and consider how He sealed His words with the shedding of His blood. Pray for grace to believe in Him, and be saved by Him, so that you too can say, "To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever" (v. 6b). Amen.