

A Salutation from the Throne of Heaven

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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.¹ 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,

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.² 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.

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.*³

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

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.⁴ Rather, as

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,

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.⁵ 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

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."⁶

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

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.