

Introduction

April 9 of this year witnessed the death of the longest-serving royal consort in British history. Prince Philip the Duke of Edinburgh was at the side of Queen Elizabeth II for more than her 6 decades of reign. A statement issued by the palace spoke of the Queen's "deep sorrow" following his death at Windsor Castle. In tribute to the duke, Westminster Abbey began tolling its tenor bell once every 60 seconds at 6:00 pm, ringing out 99 times to recognize each year of his life.

Queen Elizabeth herself lives on. At age 95, she is the longest-lived and longest-reigning British monarch. While the monarchy is said to retain popularity in Britain, it is little more than symbolic, possessing no real authority. At this point in history, in fact, royalty has largely diminished in importance on the world's stage. But this morning we are opening the book of Revelation to discover afresh the king whose power is absolute and the authority of whose throne is over all and forever.

[Read Text and Pray]

This is now the fourth week we have given our attention to the salutation with which John greets the seven churches in Asia to which the Revelation of Jesus Christ was initially delivered. It is because of the significance of each person of the Trinity as the source of the grace and peace for which John prays for those seven churches. The occasion for the Revelation is the experience of tribulation and temptation that was weighing upon these churches. They were under tremendous pressure to compromise the truth, to fade into the fabric of the culture, and to give in to the immoral cravings of the flesh. In order to withstand the assault, they would need the grace and peace of God. So from the outset of the epistle, the churches are being assured that these resources proceed from an indomitable fountain—the Triune God himself. The way in which each person of the Trinity is identified contributes to the confidence of these believers that God will certainly and sufficiently supply what these believers need to persevere.

John first highlights the eternity of God the Father and next the significance of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Today we turn our attention to God the Son—Jesus Christ. The main point is this: by his absolute sovereignty, Jesus Christ demonstrably assures his church of grace and peace. Nothing will be able to prevent Christ's determination to bless his church with precisely what she needs to be able to endure the tests and trials, tribulations and temptations that will assault her while living out life in a world that is hostile to him and to those who follow him. The way that John brings us this assurance from Christ is by pointing to three titles he bears.

Prologue

Now, before we plunge into the significance of the titles separately, we need to see that these titles share a common significance. You see all three of these titles appear in one of the psalms. It is Psalm 89. Verse 37 uses the title Faithful Witness. Verse 27 refers to the firstborn and to the place of the highest of the kings of the earth. In order to more fully appreciate what is going on here, you need to know that Psalm 89 is extolling the Lord God in view of the marvelous covenant he made with David. The psalmist, whose name is Ethan, praises the Lord for steadfast love and faithfulness which he exhibited when he made his covenant with David. Ethan recalls how in the covenant the Lord promised to establish the Davidic offspring and the Davidic throne forever. The Lord is resolute. The psalm mentions how he declared, "I will not violate my covenant or alter the

word that went forth from my lips. Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David." The use of these titles from Psalm 89 points to Jesus as the fulfillment of God's covenant with David. So we should see the three titles which we are about to explore as reiterating the elements of the covenant.

The first of the three titles then is . . .

I. The Faithful Witness

A. Jesus Christ is the Faithful Witness. This is not a title that we regularly use of Jesus, but it should be. The importance to which it refers is certainly something we hopefully bear in mind. Think on these two terms—"faithful" "witness."

The core word is "witness." That is certainly who Jesus is. He came to reveal or give witness to God. He is the word of God. He asserted "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father." John 1:18 asserts that "No one has ever seen God [but] the only God, who is at the Father's side [Jesus Christ] he has made him known." He has EXPLAINED him. Jesus told Nicodemus that he was bearing witness to him. Hebrews 1:3 asserts that the Son is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." Christ incarnate is the earthly witness to the glory and greatness and majesty of God.

Of note, he is called the FAITHFUL WITNESS. The word "faithful" conveys the idea of dependability and integrity. God keeps his word and hence he exhibits faithfulness. What he has said he does. Promises he has made he keeps. Psalm 15:4 characterizes one who does what is right as one who swears to his own hurt, and does not change. That is, he makes a promise, and he is going to keep it no matter what. So even when keeping the promise ends up costing him dearly, he keeps his word anyway. Jesus was faithful to the Lord in all things. He came and performed the work of being God's witness to the world, and he did so as a perfect representative. He did so without misrepresenting God in any way. And he did so despite the hostility that was against him—even to the point of death. The title "Faithful Witness" really epitomizes who Christ is in all of his life.

B. I want to direct you now to the use of the title "Faithful Witness" in Psalm 89:37. Curiously, it is not a messianic title in Psalm 89. Rather it is a description of the moon. In the context, God himself is making the point that the offspring of David and his throne will endure forever. It will be like the sun before God. Then he compares the throne's endurance to the moon, which he then calls a faithful witness in the skies. The thought strikes me, "how is the moon a faithful witness"? Is it possibly a faithful witness of the constancy of God? Possibly. But is not the moon also a faithful witness of the sun? Yes. Even when we cannot see the sun, the moon testifies by its reflection of the sun's light or the radiance of the sun's light that the sun is still shining. The moon has no light of its own but is a witness of the sun's light as it reflects that light.

So the graphic image representing the title "Faithful Witness" is the moon because it faithfully witnesses to the sun. So David's throne, even David's offspring in the person of Jesus Christ, is a faithful witness to the steadfast love and glory of God. And his faithfulness in bearing witness is evident in that even though that witness results in harm to himself, he is undaunted in carrying it out. Jesus was faithful to make God known even though being that witness meant taking the form of a servant and even though being that witness resulted in his death on a cross. Oh yes, a faithful witness stays true even when it means receiving the impact of an angry and hostile world for it.

For sure this is what John has in mind because if we look over in Revelation chapter 2 to what was written to the church in Pergamum, here is what we see. Revelation 2:13 says, "I know where you

dwelt, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast to my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my (get this) faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells."

C. Every Christian's calling is to be a faithful witness. Just as Jesus is a faithful witness to God, we are called to stand true to Christ in faith. God knows where we live, where Satan's throne is. He fully recognizes the hostility that opposes Christ's faithful witnesses. In this title itself is a sound of encouragement from Christ himself. He knows what it is like. He was hated. He was rejected. He was cast out. Yet he was faithful. And from him come the grace and peace necessary for us to be faithful as well. So ask for them. Draw near regularly to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. He is ready to supply. Pray earnestly and persevere boldly and faithfully. Christ-follower, don't hold back from sharing the testimony of Jesus. He did not hold back from being a faithful witness of the Father and a faithful witness to us even to his death for our redemption.

And part of his witness was that the world would hate his witnesses and followers even as it hated him. He knows the grace and peace we need because he walked this path before we did.

The Second of the three titles of Jesus Christ is . . .

II. The Firstborn of the Dead

This title draws our attention to the fact of Jesus' victory over death, to his resurrection. It also speaks of supremacy. It is highly unfortunate and gravely mistaken that cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses cite this title as an indication that Jesus is not the eternal God. They dispute that Jesus is Yahweh, claiming rather that he is a created god, who essentially was "born first."

God the Holy Spirit, however, does not use the title "firstborn" to express that Jesus is less than eternal, that he is less than fully God. Rather, his use of the term reflects that Jesus has been placed in the position of preeminence. In Psalm 89 where this title is ascribed to the offspring of David, it is clearly a title that is conferred. God declares in Psalm 89 that he has found David, his servant; his hand will be established with him; he will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. In verse 27, the Lord declares, "I will MAKE HIM the firstborn." Being the "firstborn" is not automatic by virtue of birth order or even being born. Jesus is just as much "I Am" as the Father. In distinction to the Father, however, only the Son can be said to be the firstborn of the dead, because only he took on a human body and died and rose. He is born from the dead.

He is the firstborn from the dead chronologically in that he was raised incorruptible first. He is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. One of the great hopes of the followers of Christ is our hope of resurrection. We will be raised incorruptible in glory because of Christ. This mortal will put on immortality. The perishable will put on the imperishable. Death will be swallowed up in victory. Paul assures the Corinthians, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Christian faith is this hope of bodily resurrection. It was a key component of the apostles' preaching. Acts 4 depicts great aggravation on the part of the Jewish religious leaders because of the apostles' preaching: "As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them . . ." (Acts 4:1-3a).

It is the blessed hope of those who belong to Jesus that when the fullness of the time has come that we will be raised bodily and we will forever be with him BODILY. If you believe in Christ Jesus, it is not death to die, and life in its fullness has only just begun. How encouraging for us when pressed upon by a hostile world which hates righteousness and hates those who proclaim the God of holiness! It is a reminder that the most the world can do to you is to kill your body. And it sounds pretty horrific, but it is nothing compared to an eternity of death. The assurance for the believer is that even if the world should bring about our death physically, that is the worst they can do. Witnesses unto Christ, be faithful even unto death because even if they put you to death like they did our Lord Jesus Christ, they cannot take your eternal life, and they cannot rob you of your future resurrection in which you will live forever on a new earth permeated by the glory of God.

This week I heard a "faithful witness" ask a passer-by, "What do you think happens to you when you die?" The passer-by voiced what I imagine a growing number of individuals in our time believe. He said, "When you die, that is just it. You cease to be." His goal was to make as much money and have as much fun as he could. The Bible takes issue with this guy on two fronts. On the one hand, those not reconciled to God in Christ face an eternity of bodily judgment. On the other hand, those in Christ will enjoy an eternity in redeemed and glorified bodies of delighting in God and enjoying his new creation. Listen, Jesus is the firstborn of the dead. He has overcome. For the overcomer, for the conqueror, for the believer in Christ who perseveres, it is not death to die. Remember the words of Jesus as he sent out his disciples to bear witness of him before the world, "So do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

The Third of the three titles for Jesus Christ is . . .

III. The Ruler of the Kings on Earth

A. Having been the faultless faithful witness even unto death, and having triumphed over death, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ and Father of glory "has seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet (Ephesians 1:20-22)." Those are the words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 1. In Psalm 89:27, the writer asserts that God makes him "the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." Here in Revelation 1:5, John says he is "the ruler of the kings on earth." In Revelation 19 he has a name written on his robe and on his thigh, "King of kings and Lord of lords."

B. Not only is he honored above all, he will be ascribed to be Lord by every knee and every tongue. And not only is he honored in this way, the fact is he possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. He raises kings up and he brings them down. They think they are ruling but they are doing his will. It is the same as with God's raising up Pharaoh. Pharaoh refused to comply with God's command to let his people go. But he never acted in opposition to the sovereign sway of God's rule in history. In fact Yahweh made it known that he raised Pharaoh up to harden his heart so that God's eternal purpose to display his power was realized.

C. As believers in the seven churches of Asia faced persecution from fellow citizens and from the greatest earthly empire known to history, it would be comforting for them to keep in mind that though absent to the naked eye, one king ultimately was sitting in sovereign control. The lunacy of a world gone mad in resistance to its creator does not evidence the absence of Christ's sovereignty. It proves the futility of the darkness of the depraved mind. It demonstrates that by his permissive will the Lord is setting all things up for a grand display of glory when he returns and puts down all resistance eternally.

Such is no less true for you and me right here and right now. When the culture claims to be wise yet sinks into utter and abysmal foolishness as ours is, it is outrageous and staggering. Scientific reality is denied while they say "trust the science." Myriads of gender identities are invented while God created us male and female. Truthfully, it should not be surprising though it is mind-boggling. The truth is that it is judgment. God is giving them over to their debased minds to think and to do what ought not to be done. But what could not be plainer is what Jesus said, "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. . . . But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me" (John 15:19-21).

We will do well to remember that grace and peace are supplied by him who rules all the nations. Those nations resist him, but they are under his control. Just like the devil, the worst they can do is unwittingly fulfill the role laid out for them according to his sovereign plan.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, the days ahead loom dark. It seems we live where Satan's throne is. But our savior has gone before us. He has been the faithful witness. He was faithful unto death and even rose victorious over it. He now rules and reigns. Take heart and be faithful to him. You know, the British monarchy may still be in favor with the world, but it is truly powerless. Meanwhile, our king is falling out of favor with the world, but he possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. When any earthly monarch dies, their reign ends, but when our king died, his rule had only begun. And he will reign forever.

Now under his rule the path of life for those who follow him is like his. We must be faithful witnesses. At some point we will die. But that is just the beginning: those who are his will live and reign with him forever. Meanwhile, all who refuse to repent of sin and trust in Christ, who seek to keep their lives for themselves, will ultimately lose them and face eternal death. Some of you here this morning face that very prospect. But it is my fervent hope that this very moment you will see Christ Jesus for who he really is—the faithful witness to us of the one true God, who gave his life to reconcile sinners to himself. And not only is he the faithful witness but also the only one to triumph over death and who reigns as the universe's king forever. May it be that at this moment you will forsake living for yourself to turn from sin and trust in him.

Prayer

Benediction

Grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth. That grace and peace equip you to be faithful witnesses even unto death with the hope of reigning with him forevermore. Amen.