

## **Introduction**

I recently had the joy of experiencing two opposite extremes of enjoyment. On the one hand, my daughter invited me to go rock climbing with her. I have been once before and I knew I would be in for a workout, and that is exactly what it turned out to be. You put on these tight, pointed shoes and then you buckle on a mid-body harness. As you prepare to climb, you connect the harness to an automatic belay device. That is what catches you and lowers you gently if you slip and fall or when you reach the top and get to celebrate by riding back down through the air. Once you are all secure, it is time to climb. Gravity is working against you as you place your feet on the holds below and grasp the holds with your hands above. One step at a time you proceed. And it does not take long before your heart rate increases and your arms begin to ache as the blood flows out of them. It is a challenge, but that is part of what makes rock climbing enjoyable. It is a thrill to arrive at the top of the climbing wall even if the path you took was the easiest in the building. Of course, Ariail is a rock-climbing maniac, but I was happy to make it to the top several times, even if they were among the easier climbs. You gotta start somewhere.

Oh, I said I experienced two opposite extremes of enjoyment. The other was basically effortless. Last Saturday I took Titus to the park. Titus LOVES the playground at New Berlin's Malone Park. And he loves to slide. And sometimes he wants Grandad to slide with him down the stainless steel tunnel slide that is about two stories high. Sliding is about as opposite a thrill from rock climbing as you can get. Whereas rock climbing involves significant exertion, sliding is effortless. All you have to do to slide is let go. It is that easy and the thrill comes easy too.

Now, consider which of these experiences best exhibits the nature of life as a follower of Jesus in this world. Is it more like sliding or rock climbing? Well, while we might wish it to be more like sliding, it is actually far more like rock climbing. You can't slide your way to victory over sin. You can't let go in order to discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness. Rather than letting go, you must hold on and strive upward in the midst of trial. And the trials can be quite difficult because in this world we are not merely climbing against the pull of gravity. We are also facing the hostilities of a world under the influence of the prince of the power of the air. Each day the hostility and enmity of a sin-darkened and hard-hearted world intensifies against the light and the children of the light. It is one thing to try to rock-climb up a wall against the force of gravity, but what if onlookers were hurling rocks at you at the same time? That is what it is like for followers of Christ in our time.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ was meant for the original seven churches in Asia, and it is meant for us. It is meant to encourage our persistence and perseverance in the midst of opposition and temptation and hostility. For the second time now, we turn our attention to the "Salutations to the Seven."

[Read Text and Pray]

Two weeks ago we began this series on the letters to the seven churches of Revelation. We are looking first at the greeting. John salutes the seven churches with a prayer for grace and peace. Such a prayer was altogether appropriate for the times. The churches were experiencing trouble and tribulation from without and from within. I noted for you last time that the identity of the Christian in the book of the Revelation is that of an overcomer, a conqueror, one who perseveres despite opposition. Christ's followers are rock climbers not playground sliders. In these churches, at least

one had lost his life for the testimony of the gospel. Many were experiencing financial hardship because of the gospel. Some had succumbed to the temptation of materialism. Others were falling prey to false teaching and sexual immorality. The pressure was enormous, not to mention ordinary troubles, temptations, and difficulties that come against believers even in the best of earthly times.

From the outset John focuses on the resources believers need to overcome. They need grace and peace. He also draws important attention to who supplies this grace and peace. We noted last time the grace and peace Christians need is supplied by the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For the next three weeks, we are going back to Revelation 1:4-5 to expand on the encouragement given from the fact that the Triune God is bound together to supply the Christian's critical resources. We need to grasp how EACH person of the Trinity is revealed. For the next three weeks, the central point we will consider is that the Father, the Spirit, and the Son EACH work uniquely to supply Christians with grace and peace necessary to overcome. We are afforded a solid assurance of God's working that will help us resist the temptation to fear and discouragement and instead to rejoice in hope. Today our focus is on the Father. John references the Father in verse 4 as "him who is and who was and who is to come." In this designation there are three aspects of the Father which provide assurances to the church of his provision of grace and peace. He is . . .

### **I. The God Eternal**

A. He "who is and who was and who is to come" is the God who forever is. On the surface we may easily recognize that John is drawing our attention to the eternity of God. He is the God who has no beginning and no end. He is the first and the last. There never was a time when he was not and there never will be a time when he will not be. In reference to creation he is present now and he was at the beginning and he will be even after the end.

The eternity of God is a rich theme in the scriptures. Isaiah 40:28 refers to the Lord as "the everlasting God." In Psalm 90:1-2, Moses declares, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." Hear also Psalm 102:25-27: "Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end."

In the New Testament, we hear Jesus expressing his eternity when he says to the Jews, "Before Abraham was, I am." In the past he is. In the present he is. And in the future, he is. God possesses immortality. He is eternal. He is without beginning. He is without end. He is without succession; God does not become. He simply IS. This aspect of God is part of what the psalmist was referring to in 145:3, when he says that God's greatness is unsearchable. If you try to search out the eternity of God in your mind, it will make your head spin and you may get a headache. We live and breathe within geographical bounds and within the bounds of time, but such bounds are unknown to God. Because he is eternal, a day to God is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as a day. From the perspective of eternity, the whole of history is like a snapshot. Behold, this God is who provides grace and peace!

B. We need to ask why God's eternity is important to the recipients of this letter of prophecy. What does the provision of grace and peace have to do with the eternal God? There are several connections.

First, for God, time is not an obstacle. For the church, living in the days in which Satan is unleashing his fury, time may sometimes seem to stand still, seem to run short, and even to be running out. Peter warned that in the last days, scoffers would arise questioning the promise of Christ's coming. Their taunts may tempt us to fear and wonder if he really will return. But we need to remember that God is eternal, and time does not run short for him or run out on him. Sometimes our circumstances weigh upon us and enemies surround us. Pressure rises and so does stress, but remember who is in charge here—the eternal God for whom time is no obstacle.

Second, when times are hard and persecution real and suffering intense, we need an eternal mindset. It trusts in God's eternity and his eternal purpose. An eternal mindset rests in the fact that God's good purposes in the long run will often involve affliction and challenge in the "right now." The right now is a small particle of the whole.

Moreover, a perspective which is shaped by God's eternity affects our whole view of the magnitude of temporal suffering. It becomes LITTLE when compared to the eternity of blessing which God promises his people. Suffering will not lose its pain, but our hearts will be encouraged to persevere knowing that our suffering now is but for a SHORT time. The Apostle Paul recognized it. He wrote, "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light MOMENTARY affliction is preparing for us an ETERNAL weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Peter likewise considered the time of suffering Satan's attacks as short. He said, "After you have suffered FOR A LITTLE WHILE, the God of all grace, who has called you to his ETERNAL glory in Christ will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Peter 5:10).

Third, God's eternal nature is inseparable from his promises. God's promises do not arise out of surprise but are based upon his eternal nature. God's purposes are eternal and so are his promises. Yes, he enters into life with us, but his promises are eternally set, and in his eternity he will keep them.

Finally, God's eternal nature reminds us not to set our affections on the things that are passing away and not to be shaken by those kinds of things either. Jesus told us this in the sermon on the mount. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." The problem with the world is it loves the world and the things of the world, but these are passing away. This was a big problem in materialist Laodicea. And it is a big problem in America. Grace and peace do not come from wearing the latest fashions or from driving the fanciest cars or living in the richest neighborhoods. They do not come from the highest performing stock portfolios but they come from the eternal God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who will outlast it all. Grace and peace to you come from the eternal God. So we put our faith in him and we set our affection on him.

## **II. The God Who Is Able**

John's designation of the Father as "he who is and who was and who is to come," definitely speaks to his eternity. However, there is substantially more. This is not the first time in the scripture that the Lord came to his people with this kind of designation of himself.

A. The first such instance in scripture is Exodus 3:14. At that time the children of Israel were languishing under the brutality of Pharaoh. God appeared to Moses to call him to go and deliver his people from the tyrant. In the midst of the call, Moses asks the Lord what he should say if the

Israelites would ask him the name of the God who has sent him. The Lord said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." "Say this to the people, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible presents this name as "I am the One who is" which sounds a lot like Revelation 1:4 here. Grace and peace from he who is and who was and is to come.

This personal name of God indeed speaks of his eternity but also his self-sufficiency, self-existence and self-determination. No one stands over against God. He exists by himself and he is determined by himself. I am who I am—not what someone else would make of me. And he is the one who determines. He is sovereign over all the affairs of creation. Notice back in Revelation 1, verse 8: "I am the Alpha and omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." It is in this sense that the Lord says of himself, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy." God is the only one who is fully authoritative in himself to do whatever he wants to do.

For this reason, this name of God would be so meaningful to the Israelites held captive as slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh was a mighty and powerful king. Many of the Israelites would have outward reason to doubt whether any god would be able to free them from his power. But the Lord is not any god. He is the self-existing, self-determining, self-sufficient God who is. Pharaoh's seeming indomitability was simply God's opportunity to display the greatness of his power. In the midst of striking Egypt with his plagues, the Lord spoke to Pharaoh in Exodus 9: "For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up to show you my power so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." God's self-proclaimed name, the God who is, bears witness to his universal sovereignty. God's people may be oppressed by the mightiest enemies of the world, but those enemies are no match for the one true God. He is able to deliver them according to his word. His grace and his peace will be bestowed even in the midst of their trouble.

Now realize with me that when Moses returned with news that the "I AM" had sent him and the deliverance of the Israelites was about to happen, things did not immediately improve. In fact they became worse. The children of Israel might have expected that with Moses' arrival and the promise of I AM things would have improved suddenly, but no—. This is part of the reason they needed the promise. As Pharaoh resisted and as the Lord sent plague after plague and the pressure increased, they COULD PERSEVERE in hope because "He who is" certifies that he will keep his word and he will accomplish what he promises. The darker the night, the brighter the light. The harder the path the greater strength is required and the greater the power of God is evident. The Revelation unfolds the fact that before Jesus returns in victory the night is going to get very dark and the fury of the devil and the world are going to be poured out upon the church. But in the midst of it all we can know grace and peace. We must know that grace and peace come from the one who is and who was and who is to come. When things get harder, it does not mean that God is not able. It means that he is going to display the magnitude of his power in a greater way. By his grace hold on! And to divinely imparted peace hold fast!

B. God drew emphatic attention to himself as the eternal self-existing God on another significant occasion. After God brought Israel into the land of promise, and established them, and raised up David to be their king, the people persistently wandered into spiritual adultery, worshiping the Canaanite gods. And God raised up Babylon to assault the Jews and to take them into exile and captivity in Babylon. As it had been in Egypt and as it would be in the days of the church, the times were tough and resistance to the worship of the one true God was great. Think Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Nebuchadnezzar demanded that they bow down before his golden idol. Since they would not do so, they were thrown into the fiery furnace. Years later a law put Daniel to the test. It

was enacted to disallow prayer to any god but the king. Because Daniel refused to comply, he was thrown into the lions' den. That is the way things were in Babylon.

To the exiles in Babylon, Isaiah prophesied words of hope. Four times between Isaiah 41 and Isaiah 48, the prophet addressed the people with the name of the Lord, the "I AM," along with it the designation that he is the first and the last. In this way the Lord held himself forth to the people as the God who is able. He was their only hope and their only savior. He is the God who would be able to bring them out of captivity. And he did. He had brought the Israelites out of Egypt as he promised and he brought the Jews home again to Judea.

C. Now here in Revelation, this kind of reference is set forth 6 times beginning right here in verse 4 (1:4, 8, 17; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5). He is the God who is, who was, and who is to come. These similar references draw our attention backwards. The Lord is the God who rescued his oppressed people from Egypt. He is also the God who brought the Jewish captives back to Judea from out of Babylon. And now as Christ's people languish in Babylon the great, this whole world, we are tempted and tossed and oppressed. But he is reminding us that he is the "I AM." He is the God who is able to deliver, and he will deliver his people as he has promised. In him grace and peace for his people are assured.

### **III. The God Who Is Present**

Did you notice the order in which the Father is referred? He is the one who IS, who WAS and who IS TO COME. The order is out of sequence. It goes from now to the past to the future. Normally sequence would start with the past and move to the present and then to the future. But the order is in perfect relevance to those whom the Lord is addressing. He is the eternal God, but he is present now with his people. The self-existing, self-directing God is PRESENTLY with his people. He is not lost in the past and he is not off somewhere out in the future. He is right here right now. The Lord is the God whose will began creation, who sovereignly brought it into being. And he is the God who will sovereignly dissolve the present heavens and earth and who will bring in the new creation. He will call his creatures to judgment. He will deliver his people home to the new heavens and new earth. But right now, he is. He is with us. He is presently governing creation for the proper culmination. And some of the circumstances which we must overcome will be hard, but take heart. Keep trusting. Keep climbing. Keep faithful. Even if you are threatened with the fiery furnace. Even when Pharaoh says, "More bricks!" The I AM is displaying his glory and his power. And he is dispensing grace and peace.

### **Conclusion**

It is imperative that Christians think on the eternal God and the grace and peace he supplies. How encouraging and assuring it is. As we close, though, we should think on what it means to sin against the eternal God. Our sin takes on an eternal dimension by the fact that we trespass the law of this holy and immortal God. The debt our sin incurs is inestimable. It is beyond our ability to pay. We just could never do it.

But he has paid it. And this the Father did by sending his own Son, who is also eternal. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. And the word became flesh and lived among us and we beheld his glory, as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. He did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all. In the predetermined plan of God, Jesus came as the "I AM" who delivered himself up on the cross for us. The sinless eternal Son withstood the wrath of God and paid the debt we owed. And whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

## **Prayer**

### **Benediction**

Now to him who is and who was and who is to come, the blessed and only Sovereign, who alone has immortality. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. And to you who believe in him be grace and peace.