

Introduction

Ever since last fall we have had the opportunity here at Grace to get our feet wet in the consideration of one of the most intriguing books in the Bible—the last book in the canon—The Revelation. And I felt that it is a good time to do little preaching from this book since Pastor Groves in our Wednesday studies has done a lot of good groundwork. And yet another reason for diving into this book is that it was written for us. The days in which we live are the kind of times that were confronting the original churches to whom this book was addressed.

Our times are marked by the exertion of pressure upon the followers of Jesus. It comes in three forms. First, there is the pressure from overt physical persecution. Such is going on right now all over the world, including in Myanmar where many Christians are among the Karen people, who are being run from their homes into the jungle by aggressive army action. Such is taking place as near as Canada where a fellowship of believers has seen their place of worship barricaded by 3 layers of fencing to keep them out.

Second, though, the world exerts pressure upon professing Christians to succumb to religious and moral compromise. Just two Sundays ago, on resurrection Sunday, the leader of the Labour Party in Great Britain attended a service at a church called "Jesus House" to recognize their service to the community throughout the COVID situation. However, after he posted a video of his visit, it was roundly condemned as "unacceptable" by activists in Britain. You see, Jesus House believes that marriage is only between a man and a woman. The pressure was exerted and the party leader apologized: "I completely disagree with Jesus House's beliefs on LGBT+ rights, which I was not aware of before my visit," he explained. "I apologize for the hurt my visit caused and have taken down the video. It was a mistake, and I accept that." Such pressure is mounting in the U.S. as well. And already we are seeing churches and formerly Christian organizations caving to the pressure and embracing the world's standards so as not to be shamed by the world.

A third form of attack and pressure upon the church today exerts itself as the seduction of materialism. The flesh is driven to pursue worldly satisfaction—the love of the world and the things in the world. Jesus was clear: you cannot serve God and wealth. But the prosperity gospel flourishes as so-called churches and its teachers overwrite the Bible's message with one that pursues their economic best life now.

These pressures are nothing new. Imagine how the lone remaining apostle must have felt. That is John. There he was on a island of exile, left there because of his allegiance to the gospel of Jesus Christ. All of his former companions for the cause of the Lord were gone. If tradition is correct, Peter had been crucified upside down and Paul was beheaded for the cause of Christ. And still Jesus had not returned. The explosion of growth on the day of Pentecost was a distant memory, and all around the churches were under attack. Some were caving. John and other Christians throughout the world could wonder, "Is all hope lost?"

In the midst of such times, John was given the revelation of Jesus Christ. He was given a revealing to show God's servants what was soon to take place. This revelation was delivered in the form of a letter to the seven churches in Asia. It came to bolster them and to confront them in their times. Corresponding to the nature of numerology in Revelation, the number seven corresponds to fullness and wholeness. The seven churches represent the whole of the one true church of Jesus existing in

time as local churches. The letter is not only for the initial recipients but also for Grace Community Church of West Allis. So we turn our attention for the next couple months to the first section of the Revelation consisting of the introduction and the letters to the churches. This morning we begin considering "Salutations to the Seven."

[Read Text and Pray]

The series on which we are embarking this morning will focus on the letters to the seven churches. In order to properly consider the letters themselves, we must begin with the overall introduction to those letters and John's account of his commission to write the letters. He writes to each church separately and then he writes to all the churches collectively. The main idea before us in verses 4-8 of chapter 1 becomes apparent. John greets the seven churches in Asia, calling their attention to the ground of their hope and confidence. Simply stated, the ground of their confidence is that everything they need to persevere is provided by the Triune God. It is a staggering salutation jam-packed with encouragement and assurance. So let's dig in.

I. A Time of Need

A. John is the writer of this letter. He identifies himself in verse 4 the same way Paul and Peter and James identify themselves when they were sending correspondence to churches and Christians in the early days of the church. As he tells us in verse 9, he was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. He was living in the midst of severe hostility against those who sought to preach the gospel and live it out.

B. John is addressing this letter to the seven churches in Asia. These were real churches consisting of real people living in the real world—facing attack from the devil, the world's authorities, and the world's allure. Satan was assaulting these churches directly and indirectly through temptation, false teaching, tribulation, hardship, and death. The New Testament brims with alerts that those who desire to follow Jesus and live faithfully for him will not find this world to be a welcoming place. It is abundantly evident that this is so as we consider the experiences both of John himself and these seven assemblies.

In verse 9 John describes himself as sharing a partnership with the churches in tribulation and patient endurance. We know he was in exile. And a quick look at the letters to the churches tells us they too were under severe attack. The church in Smyrna was undergoing tribulation, experiencing poverty and slander because of the word. And they are told they were about to suffer even more. In Pergamum one of their own church family, Antipas, had been killed because of his faithful witness. In Thyatira the church was under the assault of sexual temptation and sexual immorality. The church in Sardis was all but dead. In Philadelphia the believers were tempted to deny the name of the Lord. And in Laodicea materialism had taken hold and the people were lukewarm. The church of that day and the church of today lies under the exact same kinds of satanic aggression.

Corresponding to the conditions which came against the churches, the need for the hour was endurance. The identity of the Christian in the book of the Revelation is manifestly one who overcomes, one who endures, one who perseveres, one who conquers. In each of the seven letters, salvation promises are made: eat of the tree of life, not be hurt by the second death, have authority over the nations, be clothed in white garments, etc. And in each case the salvation promises are given only to those who "conquer." That is the ESV word. The term used in the NASB and KJV is "overcome." The NIV word is "victorious." Christians are overcomers. They experience hostility.

They experience the attacks of the world, the flesh, and the devil, yet true believers emerge victorious. They endure. They persevere.

Do not be surprised, dear fellow follower of Jesus, that you come under attack. It can happen from any and every angle you can imagine. It will come upon you as a temptation to indulge in the desires and lusts of the flesh. It will come upon you through compounded hardships in life in which you may feel you are pressed to the point of breaking. It will come through exposure to teachings which are false, which attempt to dislodge you from the substance and foundation of all hope—the Lord Jesus Christ. It will come upon you through the threat of and the act of persecution for your faith and witness. Peter says, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though some strange thing were happening to you.” In 1 Peter 5 he says when the devil seeks to devour you, realize that “the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.” The issue in question for believers is not whether we will face tribulation; but whether we will resist the devil, whether we will endure, persevere, overcome, and conquer.

The experience of attack is the occasion of the writing and delivery of this letter of the Revelation. It therefore begs the question, “How can we survive? How can we overcome? What do we need in order to endure?” As John proceeds, he answers these very questions.

II. The Needed Resources

John greets his readers with a prayer for two essential provisions without either of which, the believers will not overcome.

This greeting is pretty standard in the New Testament letters. “Grace to you and peace.” But we must not overlook it because it is standard. There is nothing vanilla about grace and peace.

A. The word GRACE speaks of the “de-merited” favor of God. It is the kindness God shows to people who deserve his wrath. Grace happens when justice calls for punishment and yet the judge says justice has been served by another and you are the recipient of his kindness. Grace is the ultimate explanation anyone comes to God. Paul says to the Ephesians, “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,” but “even when we were dead,” God “made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” Followers of Christ are saved by grace. But we are also kept by grace. “It is by God’s power that we are being guarded for a salvation ready to be revealed.” It is God who is at work in us both to will and to work for his good pleasure. That is ongoing grace. It is grace at the beginning, grace in the middle, and grace to the end that will bring us home. John Newton expressed this very fact when he wrote, “Through many dangers, toils, and snares I HAVE already come. ‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace WILL LEAD me home.”

What Christ-followers need is grace. Grace is needed for strength of heart.

When tested, we need grace. When tempted we need grace. When in tribulation and persecution, we need grace. Every day every believer needs to pray for himself and for others for a fresh supply of grace to see us through. The writer of Hebrews urges us to “draw near to the throne of GRACE that we may receive mercy and find GRACE to help in time of need.” That is every day, but it is certainly in the evil day.

B. The second essential here is peace. Peace with God is what the sinner receives when he by faith believes in the sufferings of Jesus to be applied to him. When a sinner is awakened to his lost and judged condition and he turns to Christ for the satisfaction of the debt he owes to God, the case God has against him is dropped. The hostility is removed, and there is peace. There is reconciliation. If a person lacks peace with God, there is no reason for him to know any kind of peace. Without peace with God, all other experiences and notions of peace are phony. They temporarily blind sinners from the fact that they abide under the condemnation of the righteous wrath of God and face an eternity absent any peace whatsoever.

The experience of peace in the midst of life begins with receiving peace from God. But experiential peace is a blessed gift to those who have peace with God. It is a peace that transcends all understanding. This peace enables them to go through the valley of the shadow of death without fear. They can persevere in the midst of trial, persecution, calamity, and temptation with a tranquility by which they will run the race of life with undimmed hope and assurance.

This kind of peace is exactly what is needed in the hearts of the saints that are experiencing the fury of the devil. We should pray for one another in the midst of whatever we may be going to be infused with the peace of God. John's mention of peace in this greeting expresses the desire that his readers will experience that peace. I assure you today that such peace is available for those whose faith and hope are in Christ. You can know confidence and assurance even when your life is being tossed up and down by the strongest storms imaginable. But from where does this peace and this grace come?

III. The God Who Provides

A. John desires that this revelatory letter be the occasion for the readers to know grace and peace. And he knows that realizing grace and peace will only happen through God. Those who fear God experience grace and peace only as they hope in God. In the 42nd and 43rd psalms, the psalmist asks himself, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" He then preaches to himself to "Hope in God." The same passion is expressed right here. The saints of God will experience his grace and peace in the midst of their troubles if they will look away from themselves to the great and wonderful and exalted God who has called them to himself. What God's people need in the midst of the worst through which we go is to fix our eyes on the only one who can provide true grace and peace for endurance and running the race all the way to the finish line.

B. There is a lot here. And it will take more time than we have remaining this morning to unpack these verses as they deserve. And so I am mainly going to focus on the fact that the great and wonderful God to which John points, who is the supplier of the resources that every Christian needs in order to overcome, is the triune God.

God is three glorious and amazing persons. The Father is referred to as the one who is and who was and who is to come. The Holy Spirit is referred to as the seven spirits who are before his throne. The Son is referred to by his name and title, Jesus the Christ, that is Jesus the Messiah, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth.

Last week as we closed out Matthew's gospel, we noted that disciples are to be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The importance is that a person's entrance into the family involves relating to each of these three persons. The Father has chosen his people and given them to the Son. The Son holds them unto himself and laid down his life to procure their rescue. The Spirit regenerates and renews and comes to live in the disciple to work the power of

God for his holiness so he reflects the image of Jesus. Each of these three persons together are the source of the grace that we need and the peace that we need to overcome and persevere to the end.

It is a glorious and mind-boggling reality that God is three persons. To plumb the depths of the Trinitarian nature of God is a mind-bending exercise. But here at least, we do well to see that the whole of the being of God—each of the three persons—operate together to provide the believer with the necessary resources to conquer and overcome. God is united around this very important task.

When we turn to the 10th chapter of John, we find the reassuring teaching of Jesus that both he and his father hold tightly to his people. Jesus explained, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who gave them to me is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." Jesus points to the fact the both he AND the Father hold on to the sheep. And nothing is going to take them away.

Now here in the salutation, yet a third party is added to bolster the assurance of God's people. We have not only the Father and the Son, but also the Holy Spirit. The resources (the grace and peace) that believers need to overcome and endure and to obtain the blessings of their salvation are supplied jointly by EACH of the three persons who are God.

The intention is to strengthen the hope and confidence of God's people by assuring us that neither tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor danger, nor sword shall be able to separate us from God. Rather, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. The Triune God is banded together in his determination to keep us and therefore to provide for us the grace and peace we need to endure.

Conclusion

So, I know a number of folks in this body are just under incredible amounts of stress these days. We all sense the intensifying pressure against Christians in our times. And then there are our own battles with the flesh and sin in our lives. Moreover, a steady stream of lies flows forth to attempt to dislodge us from the truth of the gospel. And still there is this sensual and material world which beckons us at every turn to be discontent with what we have and live our lives to fill our tanks with its riches. Then abides the daily pressures and stresses and mounting responsibilities that must be fulfilled. Attack and assault arise on every side. The roaring lion prowls around seeking someone to devour.

Look away from all that tempts. And in the midst of the pressure, be reminded that what you need is grace and peace from God. And be assured that the glorious Trinity has bound themselves as persons to supply to you the very assets that you need. Look to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit of God to give you endurance, and in that faith keep running the race.

Prayer

Benediction

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)