

Jesus, the Faithful Witness

REVELATION 1:4-6

John, to the seven churches which are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth.

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, ⁶ and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Today we begin our second installment in this survey of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. In our last sermon we dealt with the introduction to this epistle and we tried to set aside certain misunderstandings that have risen about this book. People tend to take different extremes when they read the Book of Revelation. Some are overly fascinated and attempt to read the book as though it is some sort of cryptic mystery. They think that the symbols and signs in the book reveal secrets about our future.

One of the common misconceptions that people have when they read this book is they think they are reading the writings of a man who had no idea what he was writing down. One particular author of commentaries on this book frequently uses the phrase, "a first century man seeing these things would not know how to describe it?" Of course, a first century man would be at a loss trying to describe helicopters, and nuclear explosions and much of what we know as modern technology, but sadly, more often than not, we do not understand the Biblical author, because we do not understand Biblical language. By that I don't mean Greek or Hebrew, but we are very often confused by simple Biblical speech, because we read apart from a Biblical view of the world.

Another extreme that people take when they read the Book of Revelation is they are overwhelmed with fear by the strange symbols and cataclysmic events pictured in the book. They read the book and think that it speaks of the events leading up to and including the end of the world. Rather than read the Book as it was written they read it and try and see how today's newspaper headlines line up with the writings of the epistle. These individuals will often say things like *"Things are coming together just like the Bible said they would."* I cannot tell you how frequently I hear this. Sometimes I ask them a question like, "how so?" Well usually that conversation does not end pretty. Very often they are simply repeating what they have been told, by their church, the prophecy experts, or by their parents. I submit they are afraid, because they have been taught to be afraid. Usually these folks will grab some encouragement from the "fact", that it was all prophesied in advance. The question I have to ask though is "Was it really?" Or, did the human author, and I might add the divine author have a different intention for this Book?

Last week in introducing the book, I tried to show us that not only was the Book not about the future end of the world, but it was about the revealing of Jesus Christ and what that actually means. With the coming of Christ, the old things were passing away and everything was becoming new. When Jesus said it was finished, He meant it. The language for the passing away of the old system of things was cataclysmic language without a doubt...but one of our problems in the modern evangelical world is that we fail to understand the magnitude of change Christ in His first advent brought to the world. We also fail to understand the magnitude of change He has made in us.

With so many readers of this book they put off the events of this Book into the future, usually the not too distant future. But as we pointed out last time, the author tells us very early in the Book

and he repeats himself, throughout, that the events he was writing about are soon to come to pass.

Here in the Chapter 1 we learn who the author is, where he was when he wrote the book and the purpose for his writing. The author identifies himself in verse 4 as John. It is amazing how much agreement there is among commentators as to who this book is written by. It tells us John, but there are several books in the Bible where the author is named and people still argue endlessly about who the author is. Here, we are told that John is the author and that he is writing from the island of Patmos, because of his testimony of Jesus Christ. John was imprisoned and wrote this book of victory.

We also learn in the fourth verse who the letter is addressed to. The letter is to the seven churches which are in Asia. Asia here is not speaking of the massive continent, but it is referring to Asia Minor. We know the names of the 7 Churches and we also know the locations of each of these churches. These churches are actual historical Churches and we will look at each of them in a little bit more detail, but it is important that we learn that even though this is the Word of God to His church, there is a real sense where we are reading someone else's mail. This does not mean that the material in this Book is not for us, but it was not written directly about us, it was written to actual churches that existed in the first century, the problems that were being addressed were actual events that those people knew about. The author of Revelation did not write this Book to tell us what is going to happen in our future, He wrote it to these Churches and it was written about specific problems that they were facing. He was writing to exhort them to instruct them and to give them hope.

The seven churches are not named in our text today. but they are in order, the Church at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. They were actual churches with actual people, and actual issues.

One of the ideas that has crept into modern Biblical interpretation is the idea that each of the Churches in the Book of Revelation represents an age in Church History. This view is the view developed and put forth by the Scofield Reference Bible. I cannot say this more clearly, but there is absolutely nothing in the text to indicate that each church represents an age in Church History. David Chilton points out rightly that one of the problems with this interpretation is that it is based on all the wrong presuppositions.

First is the presupposition that the Book covers all of Church History. Remember John says that the events in this book are shortly to come to pass. A second presupposition that this view holds is that the end of the Church age will be characterized by defeat and apostasy. The last of the seven Churches mentioned is the Laodicean Churches. Laodicea is characterized by the word “*lukewarm*.” The warning given by Christ to this Church is that if they remained lukewarm that He would spew them out of His mouth. There is nothing to indicate this is the state of the last age in the Church, but since that idea fits into their blueprint for defeatism, it is utilized. In this Dispensational interpretation of the churches, the Church of Laodicea and the Church of Philadelphia are both representative of the last days church, but one, Laodicea is characterized as lukewarm, and the other, Philadelphia is characterized by their faithfulness. But truly, there have been faithful believers throughout Church history, just as there have been lukewarm members of the Church.

The third presupposition, which is a very common view today, is that since we can trace how each church supposedly fits into the pattern, we now know that we are in the last days. Of

course this is sadly very much like those people who believe in horoscopes. They find elements in their horoscope that seem to fit, and then they develop an entire system around this method.

John sends an apostolic greeting early in the letter, *“Grace to you and peace from Him, who is, who was, and who is to come. and from the seven Spirits who are before His Throne.”* This greeting is not only an apostolic greeting it is a greeting from the Persons of the Trinity, though it is a different order than we normally hear. We are going to briefly look at the first two before moving on. We are used to hearing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, however here, our order in this text seems to be Father, Spirit, and Son. This has been called Liturgical order rather than theological order. It is a Trinitarian greeting.

I want us also to notice the message of the greeting. Often when we hear these blessings and benedictions we are lulled into a sense of, “come on let’s get to the meat,” but when the Apostle here offers grace and peace we have to understand this in it’s context. There is a lengthy quote from Phil Kayser that summarize this very well:

“Grace and Peace is a marvelous bit of sunshine in the face of judgment, warfare, and destruction that comes in later chapters. But He starts with the pronouncement of grace and peace and ends the book with a description of all that this grace and peace will have accomplished by the end of history, and it is a thematic element that make sense out of the wrath in between those two book ends.

In one sense, the words grace and peace don't make any sense apart from the judgment of God and the warfare of God against mankind. Grace is undeserved favor. So you don't understand the good news unless you understand the bad news of the later chapters. Every one of us deserve the fiery judgments described under the seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls of God's wrath,

and the seven condemnations. We deserve to be cast into hell along with the Beast and the false prophet, yet God gave us grace. We deserve to have God fighting against us, yet God has given us peace, not warfare.

So we have the pronouncement of grace and peace and the author of grace and peace in chapter 1 and the book ends with three chapters that show grace and peace so pervasive that the earth of those chapters looks much different than the earth of the chapters in between. So you have pronouncement of grace and peace at the beginning and the accomplished of grace and peace at the end with the chapters in between showing resistance to God's grace and peace. Who wins out? Obviously grace and peace does. The resistance of the world in between is futile.”

When John mentions He who Is who was and who is to come He is referencing the Father. I think it is worth mentioning here that this coming refers not primarily to His coming at the end of the world, but it refers to His continued and unceasing rule over history. It is truly troubling that so many in the modern Church have absolutely no vision or idea about how frequently and how often the Bible speaks of the success of the Kingdom of God in history. Remember the Bible has led us to this point from its beginning right up to this point. We are told in Psalms 110:1-2

The LORD said to my Lord,

“Sit at My right hand,

Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”

²The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion.

Rule in the midst of Your enemies!

We also learn in Isaiah 9:6-7 that the reign of the Messiah would be from Zion and it would be in the midst of enemies.

In Isaiah 9:6-7

⁶For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.

And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷Of the increase of *His* government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

Here in a verse that we often quote around Christmas time we read about the birth of the Messiah, but we also read about His rule from the throne of His father David. It tells us that this Kingdom, that He is to govern over will be marked by certain characterizations. Among these are that it would increase and that judgment and justice would be established, and that the increase of this Kingdom and dominion is not left up to some odd chance, but it would happen because the zeal of the Lord of hosts would insure it.

The Book of Revelation portrays Jesus as Prophet, Priest and King.

As a prophet He is the faithful witness in His earthly ministry, His death and His resurrection. But the question that we must ask at this time is "Does Jesus continue to testify or to witness against nations today?" And the answer is clearly, "Yes." The book of Revelation primarily highlights one example of his being witness in the first century against two nations, since "faithful witness" is His name, it does not limit the scope of Christ's prophetic work. He continues for all time to bear that title of "faithful witness."

Jesus Christ is also our priest. He is called "firstborn from among the dead." Philip Kayser says: *"In the book of Numbers, the Levitical priests took over the role of the firstborn. So the word "firstborn" is the first hint that this refers to His priestly office. But there is more that points to His priesthood. In Romans, Paul asserts that Christ's entire work of redemption was accepted by God when he was raised from the dead. It demonstrated forever that His redemption was successful and that God had ushered in the age when all things would begin to be made new - things in heaven and then things in earth. And that is all the work of Jesus as a priest."*

As King, He rules over all the nations of the earth. Now this is of course the area where I find my strongest disagreement with Dispensationalists. They deny that we are in the kingdom, many of them even deny that Jesus rules in any sense right now. One Dispensational Premillennial commentary says this: "He *will* be the Prince of the kings in the sweet by-and-by." But just in case you miss what the text clearly says. It does not say He will be it says He is. Ruler of all the Kings of the earth is His *current* title and occupation. Commentary after commentary insists that this has to be a reference to something that will come 2000 years later. John Walvoord says, "He is not exercising this right over the kings of the earth now." But He like all of them must say this in order to maintain their system.

Now speaking of things that are a present reality that many people want to place in the future, the author also writes in this text that He has made us kings and priests to His God and Father.

Notice, it does not say He will make us Kings and Priests, this is something that has already been accomplished.

The last part of verse 5 says “To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood.” No Christian scholar, author or pastor denies this. However, these words are followed by an “and has”. It is not followed by an “and he will.” He loved us, He washed us from our sins in His own blood and He HAS made us Kings and Priests to His God and Father. Now, not surprisingly the Book has much to say about this, but we will elaborate on these points further, a little later.

One of the themes we see throughout this Book is that the Kingdom of God continues to grow. We already quoted from Isaiah 9 which speaks of the growth of the Kingdom of God. But it ends with this marvelous promise that the zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

The parables of Jesus are often characterized by this theme of growth. The parable of the leaven that fills the whole loaf. Matthew 13:33 Jesus says:

“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”

And then of course there is the parable of mustard seed which is told right before this one in Matther 13:31-32:

³¹ Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, ³² which indeed is the least of all

the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

Often our modern presuppositions and ideas about the future lead us to miss certain things that are being proclaimed. As we mentioned last sermon, one of the things that is being clearly revealed about Jesus in this book is that his rule is present, and it is increasing.

When the Apostle speaks of the Seven Spirits before the throne he is speaking of the Holy Spirit. Thus, we have a complete Trinitarian greeting at the outset of the Book. Just as in our Orders of Worship we begin with a Trinitarian Call to Worship and One of the things we cannot forget Again this is not one of those images that appears nowhere else in the Bible. In Zechariah the fourth chapter Zechariah identifies the Church as a lamp stand with seven lamps which are supplied by an unceasing flow of oil through seven spouts to the seven lamps.

Zechariah 4:1--3

Now the angel who talked with me came back and wakened me, as a man who is wakened out of his sleep. ² And he said to me, “What do you see?” So I said, “I am looking, and there is a lampstand of solid gold with a bowl on top of it, and on the stand seven lamps with seven pipes to the seven lamps.

We could go on about this, but for now we need to go to the second person of the trinity who is listed third here probably for the reason that the remainder of this Book is primarily about the way in which the Son is revealed. First, let us take notice of how He is identified. He is called Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the Firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the Kings of the earth.

He is first and foremost identified as Christ, which we know means Messiah or anointed one. He is next called the Faithful Witness. The Word witness is the Greek word *martyros*, which is where we get the word martyr. Much has been made about this, so much that people often assume the only meaning of the word is the word martyr. R.J. Rushdoony says that in the Bible the Word witness spoke of a person who would work to enforce the law, and to assist in its execution, even to the point of the death penalty. Today martyr has come to mean the exact opposite of that. It is important that when we identify Jesus as the Faithful Witness, we recognize that He is witnessing for God but also against those who are at war with God.

I can remember years ago, someone was arguing against the death penalty using “What Would Jesus Do” as their argument. Now I am not trying to argue here for the death penalty or against it, but someone who asks the questions would Jesus execute someone, clearly has a little bit of an issue with texts that deal with what it means to be a witness. He witnesses against those who place their trust in anything except God and His word. Going back to Psalms 110 which speaks of the reign of the Messiah in verse 5 and 6 we read the following:

⁵ The Lord is at Your right hand;

He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath.

⁶ He shall judge among the nations,

He shall fill the places with dead bodies,

He shall execute the heads of many countries.

Jesus the Faithful martyr not only died for us, He witnessed or testified against all those who oppose Him.

Jesus is next called the Firstborn from the Dead and the Ruler of the Kings of all the Earth. The reference to Firstborn from the dead is a reference to the Resurrection of our Lord. The same title is used of Him in Colossians 1:18:

¹⁸ And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

We will also for the third week in a row reference Matthew 28:18-20. This verse, so well known as the great commission, but before the commission is given Jesus gives a full declaration of authority:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.

Why was this authority given to Christ? We know in Psalms 2 He is told to ask for the nations as His inheritance,

Psalms 2:7-12:

“I will declare the decree:

The LORD has said to Me,

‘You are My Son,

Today I have begotten You.

⁸ Ask of Me, and I will give You

The nations for Your inheritance,

And the ends of the earth for Your possession.

⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron;

You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.'”

¹⁰ Now therefore, be wise, O kings;

Be instructed, you judges of the earth.

¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear,

And rejoice with trembling.

¹² Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,

And you perish in the way,

When His wrath is kindled but a little.

Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.

You see, Jesus was given this authority to rule over all the Kingdoms of the Earth, after his resurrection. This was Satan's temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4:8-10

Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to Him, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.”

¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”

In Philippians Chapter 2 we see the path that Jesus took to win this Kingdom, His path was the path of humility, service and obedience, and yet the reward was all power and all authority in heaven and on earth.

⁵ Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God,

⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

⁹ Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,

¹¹ and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

His path, to the throne, was the path of Humility. I think this might be one of the reasons so many of us miss the message of the victory of Christ in time. His victory was won through dying. His crown was obtained through humiliation, and the part that confounds so many is that His Kingdom which He obtained through his death and His resurrection can only be entered into by those who will follow the example of His faithful witness. Those who will live and love and serve in much the same way as He did.

In our Lord's death and resurrection he not only showed Himself to be the rightful ruler of all the Kings of the earth, He also showed Himself to be the ruler of death, hell and the grave.

As I was pondering this week on the message I thought back to the passing of my mother. As we all are likely aware. today is Mother's Day. This October, my mom will have been gone for 32

years. I remember the day that she died, I was in the hospital room with her when she passed, and in the background she had music playing and the song that was playing was a Steve Green song entitled, "*For the Glory of the Lord.*" The Words that were being sung when she died were, "*all that has been taken, it shall be restored.*" Because of the victory that Christ accomplished, the sting of death is gone, because Jesus, the faithful witness defeated death. Death can no longer hold its prey. Death is truly defeated.

In 1 Corinthians 15 we are told that death will be the last enemy to be defeated. But when Christ rose from the dead, He at that time dealt to death its mortal wound. Jesus Christ is called the Faithful witness in verse 5, but what is it that He is witnessing to? True He is a witness to the plan of God and the glorious advancement of His Church, but in the verses that follow one of the things that we see is that Christ is also a witness or an example to us as to how we can follow in His steps. In Matthew 10:39 Jesus tells us that the one who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

These words were not an expression by Jesus telling us to do something that He Himself did not do. No, what Jesus was saying here is Look unto me, I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. If you want to know the way, follow me. If you want to know the truth hear my words. And we know this did not mean to just audibly grasp them. He wants us to really and truly hear His word. Repeated several times in the next two chapters of this Book, we will hear the expression, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Lastly, He is telling them, if you want life, true life... abundant life, follow the faithful witness, the example that I am showing you. Lay down your life.

The Book of Revelation is one of my favorite Bible Books. In Chapter 12 verse 18 we have what I consider to be a central truth in this Book.

“And they overcame him (speaking of the devil) by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.”

The familiar passage John 3:16 begins: *For God so loved the World, that He gave...*

Jesus in submission to His Father became the lowest of the low, and in so doing He won an eternal Kingdom. We enter in following the example that He gave. We enter in by dying, and by so doing, we receive all that Christ has won for us.

In just a moments, after our offering, we are going to be singing one of my all time favorite hymns. *"Great is thy Faithfulness."* One of the things that strikes me about this hymn is from where it is located in the Bible. The Words of this Hymn are right in the middle of the Book of Lamentations. The Book is written while God's people are in captivity. Nothing is going right, the Book is a lament. And yet, right in the middle of their captivity and their trials we hear this wonderful statement about the steadfast love of the Lord and how it never ceases.

We are often tempted to look at our surroundings. We are tempted to look at headlines and crisis's as they occur and think the end is near, but as Christians we must always remember that we walk by faith and not by sight.

In this intro to this last Book of the Bible we see that Christ is that faithful witness, not only does he conquer death, He also is portrayed as the overcomer of all the Kingdoms of the world. He conquered by submission, humility and death, but He rose from the dead and now reigns victoriously.

May we be a people who follow the faithful witness of our Lord Jesus Christ wherever it is that He leads us. May we recognize all that He has done for us, and may we never forget that Jesus is always faithful.