HE HAS MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM AND PRIESTS

Revelation 1:1–8

Key Verses: 1:5b,6

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.”

 Revelation is a long, 22-chapter letter meant to be read aloud as church members gathered to listen. 1:1–8 is the prologue, and many of its ideas are repeated in the epilogue, 22:6–21. This prologue and epilogue are like an envelope around the main contents. In the prologue the author incorporates elements from both the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament epistles to introduce us to Revelation’s major themes. He sets out to show us that this letter is authentically from God, and that the end of the world is near. He reminds us of who the three Persons of the Trinity are, who we are, and of the importance of listening to the book’s message and taking it to heart. In this study we especially want to reflect on who Jesus is and what he’s done for us. We live in a world full of sin that rejects Jesus and his servants, but by his grace he’s made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve God in the same way Jesus did. We want to learn why having this identity and direction is so important. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally today.

 Read verse 1. The first sentence here is like the book’s title. It says it’s a “revelation.” The Greek word is “apokalypsis;” in English, it’s “apocalypse.” In our culture “The Apocalypse” has come to be known as the dramatic, final destruction of the world. There are many epic movies about it. But in Greek the word simply means to “reveal,” “unveil” or “make fully known.” So verse 1b uses the expression, “He made it known…” The Greek verb, “semaino,” is the same root of the noun, “semeion” or “sign,” used later on in the book (12:1,3; 15:1). In Revelation the author uses a variety of signs, symbols and numbers that can seem overwhelming. But their point is not to confuse us; these symbolic figures and numbers are to reveal or make known what’s happening in the world, to make hidden realities visible. They reveal not only Jesus’ final return, but also what will happen to the kingdoms of the world, to people who accept the gospel and those who don’t, and to all the forces of evil.

 The first three verses describe this book as “prophecy.” The epilogue also calls it “prophecy,” four times (22:7,10,18,19). Actually, the Bible mentions four kinds of sacred speech: revelation, knowledge, prophecy and teaching (1Co14:6,26,30; cf. Ro16:25; 2Co12:1,7; Gal1:12; 2:2; Eph3:3). We’re encouraged to eagerly desire prophecy because it “speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort” (1Co14:1,2). The real sense of Biblical prophecy is not just to predict the future, but to reveal the mind of God, the will of God or the knowledge of God. So Revelation is about helping us know God better, to really know his mind and his will (Eph1:17). As we come to know God better, we’re strengthened, encouraged and comforted. We shouldn’t be studying Revelation to figure out the times or dates when things will happen (Ac1:7); we should meditate on its prophetic signs and symbols to learn more about God. Verse 1 tells us that these prophecies aren’t meant to be exclusive; they’re meant to “show his servants,” meaning all believers, including us.

 In verse 1 we also see the process of revelation. It originated from God himself. God gave it to Jesus Christ. Then Jesus Christ sent his angel to his servant John. Finally, John recorded these prophetic visions. This John was one of the Twelve apostles, the author of John’s Gospel and his three Epistles. Why does John want us to know this process of revelation? Sometimes people tell us a vision they’ve had. Though it may seem fantastic and exciting, such a vision often turns out to be nothing but a fantasy. But through explaining this process of revelation John wants us to know that the revelations he saw are all true. The Book of Revelation repeatedly describes its own words as “trustworthy” and “true” (19:9; 21:5; 22:6). And it says that those who accept its prophetic words are “blessed” (1:3; 22:7). Ultimately, we learn something important here about God. Revelation shows us that God is “the revealer of mysteries” (Da2:47). If we want to know the mysteries of God, of what’s happening or going to happen, we need to accept God’s revelation to John and pay close attention to it.

 In verse 1 this revelation shows us “what must soon take place.” The word “soon” can be translated as “promptly” or “quickly.” “Soon” is used in the epilogue four times (22:6,7,12,20), and another three times in other places in the book (2:16; 3:11; 11:14). Verse 3 adds that “the time is near.” At the end of Revelation, the epilogue repeats this same expression, “the time is near” (22:10). “Quickly?” “Near?” This book was likely written around A.D. 95, nearly 2,000 years ago. So what happened to “quickly” and “near”? Actually, when Jesus first began his ministry, he said, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near” (Mk1:15a). Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the long-awaited kingdom of God began, in fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies. Ever since then, God’s kingdom in this world is “near,” and it will continue to be “near” until the very end. This kingdom is “near” and “soon” in the sense that it’s immediately available, right now, to anyone who repents and believes (Mk1:15b).

“Near” and “soon” also apply to the tribulations that follow the good news. Much of the struggle in Revelation is characterized by the expression “the great tribulation” (7:14). This tribulation began in Acts during the first persecution of Christians. The churches mentioned in Revelation were also experiencing pressure to recant, as well as hardships, imprisonment, suffering, persecution, even death, because of their faith in Jesus. These tribulations have continued wherever the gospel is preached, to this day. These tribulations are actually near to each one of us, and we’re all called to endure such tribulations patiently (1:9).

In Revelation, “near” and “soon” also apply not to his final second coming but also to all the unseen “comings” of Jesus to judge his church (2:16; 3:11; cf. 2:5; 16:15). Most of all, “near” and “soon” summarize the prophetic viewpoint, in which the end is always imminent. This viewpoint is everywhere in the New Testament (e.g. Lk18:8; Ro13:11; 16:20; Php4:5; 2Pe3:3–9). The words “near” and “soon” are both a warning to weak Christians and a promise to persevering Christians. They challenge us all to live a vigilant Christian life. When we believe these words “near” and “soon,” we should live in the light, encourage one another daily, and be spiritually alert and prayerful (Ro13:12; Heb10:24,25; 1Pe4:7).

 John’s role in this revelation is also highlighted. Look at verses 1b,2. An angel from Jesus made it known to him. In the epilogue the angel’s role in revealing things is repeated three times (22:6,8,16). Throughout Revelation John encounters angels who show him visions of God. Verse 2a says John “testifies to everything he saw.” The word “testify” in Greek is “martyr.” It means to speak the truth even if the reaction is dangerous or deadly. With the word “everything,” John is saying that he didn’t leave anything out. This again tells us that what he wrote in this book is “trustworthy and true” (22:6).

To reinforce this, in verse 2 John characterizes the revelation he saw as “the word of God.” It’s the same expression used repeatedly in the Book of Acts (4:31; 6:2; 8:14; 11:1). It’s a way of describing Christian witness and the basic gospel message. This expression “the word of God” is repeated seven times in the Book of Revelation (1:2,9; 6:9; 17:17; 19:9,13; 20:4). John uses the number seven in so many ways throughout this book. For John, seven represents fullness, completion or perfection. So “the word of God” is the perfect message and the perfect basis for a confession of faith for all believers.

The expression “the testimony of Jesus Christ” is repeated six times in Revelation, and five of them are with the phrase “the word of God” (1:2,9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4). “The testimony of Jesus Christ” means both what Jesus came to testify to the world, and, what believers testify about Jesus to the world. It’s the most precious and sacred testimony. It’s not easy to bear witness to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, because, as we’ve seen, when we do so, persecution always follows. Those who hold fast to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus come under spiritual attack (11:7; 12:17). In fact, because he kept testifying to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ John was sent to exile on the island of Patmos (9b). Because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ many believers have been killed (2:13; 6:9; 20:4). But the truth is even more important than life itself (12:11).

 Read verse 3. This is the first of seven “blessings” or beatitudes in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7,14). These blessings comfort us with promises of rewards in God’s kingdom and exhort us to live exemplary lives in this dark world. In the early church, one who “reads aloud” the words of this prophecy refers to a Bible teacher or messenger, and those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it are anyone willing to listen. In chapters 2 and 3 believers are called to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” So we should not treat the Book of Revelation as strange and ignore it, but read, hear and believe it. In Greek the expression “take to heart” means to guard, keep, observe or obey. This word is repeated twice in the epilogue (22:7,9) and a total of ten times throughout the book (1:3; 2:26; 3:3,8,10; 12:17; 14:12; 16:15). “Hearing” and “keeping” God’s word is also a key theme of John’s Gospel. This theme reminds us that Revelation is not meant to just pique our curiosity about the end times; it’s meant to challenge us to keep, take to heart and obey God’s truth.

 In verses 4–8 are greetings and a doxology. Verse 4a again identifies John as the author, and tells us he’s writing to the seven churches in different major cities in the province of Asia, in modern-day Turkey. They’re listed in the geographical order someone delivering the letter would travel through. At this time there were more than seven churches in that area, but John chooses the number seven again, to represent fullness. These seven churches are described more fully in chapters 2 and 3, where we see that they’re not obscure or irrelevant churches; they’re representative of all churches (2:7a, 11a,17a,29; 3:6,13,22). So in a sense Revelation is addressed to every community of believers today, including us.

 At the opening of this long letter, how does John greet them? As in many letters in the New Testament, John begins by saying, “Grace and peace to you.” The Greeks would often begin their letters by saying, “Grace to you.” The Hebrews would begin theirs by saying, “Peace to you.” Neither of them could offer real grace or real peace. But in this troubled world Christians have the source of real grace and real peace. What is it?

 Read verses 4b,5. The first source of grace and peace is “the one who is, and who was, and who is to come,” meaning the God our Everlasting Father. This description of God is repeated four times in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5), but is found nowhere else in the New Testament. The emphasis here in verse 4 is on the first descriptor: “the one who is.” Our world is full of evil But God who was in the past and who will be in the future is the God who is still there now, the God who is working in our world today, the God who is still there to hear our prayers, to see how we’re living and to strengthen us with his own presence.

 The second source of grace and peace is “the seven spirits that are before his throne,” which is an unusual expression for the sevenfold Holy Spirit, using the number seven to signify his perfect work in the world (cf. Isa11:2; Zech4:2,6,10). Three other places in Revelation use this symbol of seven spirits to refer to the Holy Spirit (3:1; 4:5; 5:6). The perfect Spirit helps us hear God’s word and remember Jesus, and this is what helps us to persevere in faith.

 The third source of grace and peace is Jesus. Read verse 5a again. Here we find three phrases that describe Jesus. First, he’s called “the faithful witness.” In 3:14 he’s called “the faithful and true witness.” A major theme in Revelation is being a witness of Jesus (1:9; 6:9; 12:11,17; 17:6; 19:10; 20:4). But Jesus, “the faithful witness,” is the best example of being a witness. He stood against evil, hypocrisy and idolatry and for the truth, and gave his own life to do so. When we stay close to him, we receive grace and peace to live as his faithful witness, holding fast to our testimony even against all the powers of evil (17:14), even to the point of death (2:10,13).

 Jesus is also called “the firstborn from the dead.” This expression is an allusion to Psalm 89:27, where David is called God’s “firstborn.” In Judaism, the firstborn was the next head of the family, the one who controlled the inheritance. Jesus, the firstborn from the dead, gives us God’s kingdom as our inheritance. Colossians 1:15 also calls him “the firstborn over all creation,” meaning Sovereign Lord over all things. Romans 8:29 calls him “firstborn among many brothers and sisters,” meaning we’re called to be like him, and Hebrews 1:6 says that God brought “his firstborn into the world,” meaning he’s our object of worship. As the firstborn, he especially made our resurrection possible (Col1:18; 1Co15:20). In Revelation, Christ the firstborn destroys death (20:14; 21:4) and shares his victory and glorious reign with believers (2:7,11; 20:6; 22:2,3,14,17). Christ the firstborn gives us grace and peace to be faithful to him.

 Finally, Jesus is called “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” another allusion to Psalm 89:27. Revelation frequently mentions the kings of the earth; generally, they’re evil, and they oppose Christ and his kingdom (6:15–17; 10:11; 16:14; 17:2,14; 18:3,9ff.; 19:18,19). But they’re also the object of Christian mission, and in the end they give all their glory to Jesus (21:24). Revelation describes Jesus as “the King of kings and Lord of lords,” whose kingship and kingdom will reign forever (19:16; cf. 11:15). It tells us that people from even the highest social standing can receive his grace and come under his reign. When we meditate on Jesus “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” we’re filled with grace and peace.

 As he thinks about Jesus, John breaks out into praise. We so easily take for granted what Jesus did for us. We need to reflect on what he’s done until, like John, our hearts are filled with his praises. Read verses 5b,6. The first reason to praise Jesus is because he “loves us.” He loved us in the past during his earthly life and ministry, and especially through his sacrificial death. He loves us in the present through his deep concern and watchfulness for us, and he’ll love us in the future through his final battle with evil and death, vindicating us and bringing us to his kingdom. When we experience it, we can’t but praise him for his love.

 The second reason to praise Jesus, John says, is because he “has freed us from our sins by his blood.” Throughout Revelation Jesus is described as “the Lamb who was slain” (5:6,12; 13:8), and it repeatedly mentions his shed blood (1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11; 19:13). His blood purchases us to belong to God (5:9). His blood sanctifies us and gives us victory over this world (7:14). His blood enables us to serve God and to be faithful to Jesus even unto death (12:11). When we accept his blood, we can’t but praise him.

 The third reason to praise Jesus is because he includes even us in his reign and in his work. Verse 6a says he “has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.” This theme is repeated in 5:10, “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God…” It’s repeated again in 20:6, “…they will be priests of God and of Christ.” It’s the major thesis of the Book of Revelation. Though tempted and persecuted, believers are “a kingdom and priests” who serve God in this dark world. This expression is an allusion to Exodus 19:6, where God told the Israelites, “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (cf. Isa61:6). Apostle Peter also told believers, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession…” (1Pe2:9a). Revelation tells us that as believers, we are “a kingdom.” And it repeatedly tells us what this means; it means to reign with Jesus, to share his authority both now and in the future (2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:4,6). Instead of feeling pitiful like marginalized victims, we need to see our true identity in Christ; we’re called to reign with him, and when we’re close to him, we do!

 In Christ, we’re also “priests” who serve God. Revelation repeatedly shows us that as believers we’re called to the mission to bring the good news of Jesus to all peoples of all nations (5:9; 7:9; 14:6,7; 15:4; 21:24–26). A priest doesn’t just wear robes; a priest brings God to people, and people to God. We were nothing but slaves of sin, but by his blood we’re now called to serve the same God and Father Jesus served (Jn20:17b). As priests of Christ, we share the good news of Jesus through our prayers, our words, even our very lives. Just as Jesus is our Great High Priest, we’re called to live as priests, humbly and sacrificially praying and serving people who do not yet know Jesus, praying for them to turn to Jesus and receive his grace. A life of serving God is the best life (cf. Lk1:74,75).

 When John thinks about this, he bursts into praise. Look at verse 6b. “…to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.” There are many false kinds of glory and power. But only Jesus has real glory and power in this world. Only Jesus is worthy of our worship.

 Read verse 7. This verse combines the prophecies of Daniel 7:13,14 and Zechariah 12:10. The Book of Daniel is used most in Revelation, especially Daniel 7 and its focus on the everlasting kingdom. Coming on clouds is imagery of his power and glory. Those who pierced him includes not just the literal people there at the cross, but all who persecuted Jesus’ people. Those who mourn because of him is repeated in Revelation (18:9; cf. Mt24:30). They include both Jesus’ enemies who realize finally how horribly wrong they’ve been and who have no hope, and those who repent and find real hope in Jesus (cf. Zech14:16). Jesus’ coming is another major theme of Revelation (16:15; 19:11–16). It’s repeated again in the epilogue (22:7,12). Verse 7 says, “Look!” John’s vision of Jesus coming in glory needs to be ours.

 Read verse 8. The Alpha and the Omega is repeated in the epilogue (22:13) and elsewhere (1:17; 21:6). Twice it refers to God, and twice to Jesus. Alpha was the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and Omega, the last. By using this expression, John is saying that God and Jesus are eternal, there at the beginning and there at the end, and they’re sovereign over all history. God is the Lord God, and the Almighty. This is another great comfort to believers living in this troubling world.

 Today we mainly thought about who Jesus is and what he’s done for us. Let’s read verses 5b,6 again. May God help us to experience this great love of Jesus. May God give us this clear identity and direction in our hearts to be a kingdom and priests who serve him in this dark world. Most of all, through the study of Revelation, may God fill us with praise for Jesus and a vision of his coming.