

2. The Return of the King Revelation 1:1-8

Whenever we experience abuse, hostility, injustice, trauma, trial or loss, we wonder: “Why is this happening to me? How can this be happening to us? What on earth is God up to? How can this be in God’s plan for our lives? How long before God brings an end to our suffering?”

Imagine being in the sandals of the Jesus’ followers living in ancient Turkey towards the end of the first Century AD. They believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Promised Messiah, the Son of God. They believed that through his death and resurrection, Jesus had freed them from their sin, guilt and shame; and shared with them his victory over death and the powers of evil.

Yet, finding themselves under the hammer of hostilities, they wondered: Why is God allowing us to suffer persecution? Why do the Jews report us the Roman authorities, accusing us of being outlaws for practicing our faith?¹ How are we supposed to respond to the fastest growing religion of our time: the worship of Caesar as lord? How can we resist the might of Rome when they marginalise us from the market place, confiscate our property, beat us up, throw us into prison, or march us into the arena for public execution? Are we’re wasting our time following Jesus rather than the one who seems to be the “lord of this world”? ²

Revelation is God’s emphatic: “NO!” to that question. Christians under the pump are given a fresh vision that puts their persecution into perspective, and infuses them with hope for the future. Those who read aloud, hear and take the words of this revelation to heart are blessed by God (Rev 1:3). So what does John begin writing to the people of God?

Greetings

As in many NT letters, John greets his audience with **grace** (God’s undeserved favour in Jesus) and **peace** (being in a right relationship with God).

John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

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, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead,
and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (Revelation 1:4-5 NIV)**

Grace and peace comes first from God the Father, the everlasting One who **is and who was and who is to come**. There’s no place or time where the great I AM is not accessible. He always wants to bring grace and peace to his people.

Grace and peace come from **the seven spirits** before God’s throne – this is another name for the Holy Spirit.

And grace and peace come **from Jesus Christ** – whose credentials speak for themselves:

First, Jesus is **the faithful witness** to the plans and purposes of God. The word for witness (*martus*) is the root of our English word ‘martyr’. Jesus’ witness to the truth of God against the lies of the religious leaders provoked them to murder him. Yet Jesus did not compromise the truth or quit his mission! For the joy of having you and me with him in eternity, Jesus faithfully endured the cross and its shame.

Second, Jesus is **the firstborn from the dead** – and therefore Lord of both the dead and the living! Jesus gives us hope and courage, because he has gone before us into the future where he rules over all. As the first born from the dead, Jesus’ resurrection guarantees our resurrection. Jesus is our destiny!

¹ Judaism was approved as a legal religion by Rome; but not Christianity (until the Edict of Milan in AD 313). The Jews condemned Christianity in their councils at Jamnia (AD 70-85), after which they reported Christians to Roman authorities as religious deviants who needed to be punished.

² NT Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, (SPCK, 2011), 3.

Third, Jesus is **ruler of the kings of the earth**. Yes, evil emperors and rulers can still threaten God's people with consequences if we fail to carry out their bidding. But they no longer have power to rob us of life with Jesus. All rulers of the earth will one day be accountable to him!

Response of praise from God's people

After his opening greeting, John draws his readers into praising Jesus. Let's declare this together: **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 1:5-6 NIV)

Jesus **loves us** – now and always. Do you know and accept Jesus love for you? No matter whether we are good or bad, mad or sad, he loves us. Always has, always will.³

Jesus **has freed us from our sins by his blood** – no amount of silver or gold could pay for our forgiveness. When Jesus died at the cross, he took the blame that we deserved. As the perfect Lamb of God, his blood of the new covenant was poured out – for the forgiveness of all your sins. You are now free to live as God's loved and precious child; and free to be part of his restoration story for his world.

Jesus **has made us to be a kingdom and priests...** When we were baptised into Jesus' death and resurrection, we became citizens of **his kingdom**. By the Holy Spirit, our lives demonstrate our allegiance to Jesus as our King. Set apart from the world, we are like priests who join Jesus in serving our heavenly Father. As we bless others and pray for them in Jesus's name, we bring glory to God.

So we declare: **To him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen.** Amen?

Look! The King is Coming!

"Look, he is coming with the clouds..." (Revelation 1:7 NIV)

Jesus claimed this of himself in his parables, and at his trial before the Jewish Council.⁴ The imagery comes from the OT prophet Daniel:

As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honour, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal - it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14 NLT)

Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all people on earth "will mourn because of him!" (Revelation 1:7 NIV)⁵ No exceptions. For those who killed Jesus, along with all who have rejected Jesus and his people, this will be a dreadful day of intense mourning.

Imagine the ongoing torment of regret: "Those followers of Jesus were right after all! Why did we spend our lives ignoring them and rejecting God to do our own thing? Why did we mock them, laugh at them, and accuse them of being simple minded? Now we realize they were telling us the truth – but it's too late...." John Strelan: "They will beat their breasts in sorrow, not for what they did to Jesus, but for what they have done to themselves."

Note that Christians are not mentioned here. That is because Revelation tells of a *resurrection* of Christians and a judgement of *unbelievers*.⁶ I think the idea is that those who have faithfully endured their suffering have already been promoted to glory. From that vista, they will watch the all-conquering King execute perfect justice. Jesus' return will complete the task of setting up his rule here on earth as in heaven.⁷ That's why the saints declare: So shall it be! Amen!

Again the living God reminds us that he is in charge: **"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."**(Rev 1:8 NIV)

³ John Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven – A Commentary on Revelation*, (Openbook Publishers, 1994), 30.

⁴ Matthew 16:27, 24:30, 25:31-33, 26:64, Luke 17:30-36. See also 1 Corinthians 15: 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10)

⁵ See Zechariah 12:10-12, Is 53:5, John 19:34-37.

⁶ John Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven*, 32.

⁷ NT Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, 5.

Jesus is in control and has us covered

A few verses later in Revelation chapter 1, John tells us of seeing the Son of Man in all his glory: **When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.** (Revelation 1:17-18 NIV)

Now John was scared spitless. What’s the first thing that Jesus says to him? “Do not be afraid!” Why not? Jesus gives us the reason!

I am the First and the Last – Here Jesus declares himself as the first and last, the source and destiny of all creation. He is Lord over time and the goal of human history.

I am the living One! Jesus was dead, but on the third day what happened? He rose again. He was seen by over 500 witnesses in multiple encounters over 40 days. He has smashed through the wall of death into eternity – and come back on this side to assure us: “Do not be afraid...I’ve conquered the grave. I hold the keys to release people from death; and bring them into eternity with me.”

Friends, our eternal destiny is secure in Jesus.

We need to remember this when:

- life confronts us with ongoing trials, hostilities, loss or trauma;
- attending the funeral of a loved one who believed in Jesus;
- we are fearful in the present or anxious about the future;
- we are facing our own death.

Jesus is always with us. And Jesus is always for us – whether things are good, bad, or ugly! No emperors or kings, no governments or world powers can prevent God from bringing his ultimate restoration plan to completion!

Since Jesus is in charge – of the world and of us - we don’t need to be afraid. Since Jesus has got us covered from here till eternity, we can live in the hope of knowing that we are his forever.

So how about we join the ancient saints in giving him glory:

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 1:5-6 NIV) (c.1790)