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Back to the Future (Revelation 1:1–6)

1

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near. John to the seven churches that 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, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1:1–6)

Many people are fascinated, even obsessed with the future. They faithfully read their horoscopes, seek out Tarot card readers, have their palms read, feed on futuristic science fiction material, or call one of the many “psychic hot lines” advertised on TV. Some people delve more

deeply into the occult, seeking out mediums (as did King Saul), futilely and sinfully attempting to obtain information about what is to come by “consult[ing] the dead on behalf of the living” (Isa. 8:19). The dead cannot, of course, respond to such efforts at contact, but demons do, masquerading as the dead and propagating lies.

All such attempts to discern the future, however, are in vain. There is only One who knows and declares the future: God (Isa. 44:7; 45:21; 46:9–10). Only in Scripture can truth about the future be found. The Old Testament prophets, particularly Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah, provide glimpses of the future. So did our Lord in His Olivet Discourse, along with Peter and Paul in their inspired writings. But the book of Revelation provides the most detailed look into the future in all of Scripture. The fitting capstone of God’s revelation to man in the Bible, the book of Revelation unveils the future history of the world, all the way to history’s climax in the return of Christ and the setting up of His glorious earthly and eternal kingdom.

By way of introduction, John lists eleven characteristics of this marvelous book: its essential nature, central theme, divine source, human recipients, prophetic character, supernatural delivery, human author, promised blessing, compelling urgency, Trinitarian benediction, and exalted doxology.

ITS ESSENTIAL NATURE

The Revelation (1:1a)

These two words are essential to understanding this book. Many people are confused by the book of Revelation, viewing it as a mysterious, bizarre, indecipherable mystery. But nothing could be further from the truth. Far from *hiding* the truth, the book of Revelation *reveals* it. This is the last chapter in God’s story of redemption. It tells how it all ends. As the account of the Creation in the beginning was not vague or obscure, but clear, so God has given a detailed and lucid record of the ending. It is unthinkable to believe that God would speak with precision and clarity from Genesis to Jude, and then when it comes to the end abandon all precision and clarity. Yet, many theologians today think Revelation is not the precise record of the end in spite of what it says. They also are convinced that its mysteries are so vague that the end is left in confusion. As we shall see in this commentary, this is a serious error that strips the saga of redemption of its climax as given by God.

Apokalupsis (**Revelation**) appears eighteen times in the New Testament, always, when used of a person, with the meaning “to become

visible.” In Luke 2:32, Simeon praised God for the infant Jesus, describing Him as “a Light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.” Simeon exulted that the Messiah had been made visible to men. Paul spoke in Romans 8:19 of the manifest transformation of believers in glory as “the revealing of the sons of God.” Both Paul (1 Cor. 1:7) and Peter (1 Pet. 1:7) used *apokalupsis* to refer to the revelation of Christ at His second coming.

The book of Revelation contains truths that had been concealed, but have now been revealed. Though it nowhere directly quotes the Old Testament, 278 of its 404 verses refer or allude to Old Testament prophetic truth, and it amplifies what was only initially suggested in the Old Testament.

The Apocalypse reveals a great many divine truths. It warns the church of the danger of sin and instructs it about the need for holiness. It reveals the strength Christ and believers have to overcome Satan. It reveals the glory and majesty of God and depicts the reverent worship that constantly attends His throne. The book of Revelation reveals the end of human history, including the final political setup of the world, the career of Antichrist, and the climactic Battle of Armageddon. It reveals the coming glory of Christ’s earthly reign during the millennial kingdom, the Great White Throne judgment, and depicts the eternal bliss of the new heaven and the new earth. It reveals the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ over all human and demonic opposition. The book of Revelation describes the ultimate defeat of Satan and sin, and the final state of the wicked (eternal torment in hell) and the righteous (eternal joy in heaven). In short, it is a front-page story of the future of the world written by someone who has seen it all.

But supremely, overarching all those features, the book of Revelation reveals the majesty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. It describes in detail the events associated with His second coming, revealing His glory that will one day blaze forth as strikingly and unmistakably as lightning flashing in a darkened sky (Matt. 24:27).

ITS CENTRAL THEME

of Jesus Christ, (1:1b)

While all Scripture is revelation from God (2 Tim. 3:16), in a unique way the book of Revelation is *the* revelation—the revelation of Jesus Christ. While this book is certainly revelation *from* Jesus Christ (cf. 22:16), it is also the revelation *about* Him. The other New Testament uses of the phrase *apokalupsis Iēsou Christou* (**Revelation of Jesus Christ**)

suggest that John's statement in this verse is best understood in the sense of revelation about Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 1:12; 2 Thess. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:7). The Gospels are also about Jesus Christ, but present Him in His first coming in humiliation; the book of Revelation presents Him in His second coming in exaltation. Every vision and description of Him in Revelation is one of majesty, power, and glory.

Christ's unveiling begins in 1:5–20, where He is revealed in His ascended majesty. Those verses also provide a preview of His second coming glory. In chapters 2 and 3, as exalted Lord of the church, He reproves and encourages His church. Finally, chapters 4–22 provide a detailed look at His second coming; the establishing of His millennial kingdom, during which He will personally reign on earth; and the ushering in of the eternal state.

W.A. Criswell, long-time pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, gave the following explanation as to why Christ must yet be revealed in glory:

The first time our Lord came into this world, He came in the veil of our flesh. His deity was covered over with His manhood. His Godhead was hidden by His humanity. Just once in a while did His deity shine through, as on the Mount of Transfiguration, or as in His miraculous works. But most of the time the glory, the majesty, the deity, the wonder and the marvel of the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, were veiled. These attributes were covered over in flesh, in our humanity. He was born in a stable. He grew up in poverty. He knew what it was to hunger and to thirst. He was buffeted and beaten and bruised. He was crucified and raised up as a felon before the scoffing gaze of the whole earth. The last time that this world saw Jesus was when it saw Him hanging in shame, misery and anguish upon the cross. He later appeared to a few of His believing disciples, but the last time that this unbelieving world ever saw Jesus was when it saw Him die as a malefactor, as a criminal, crucified on a Roman cross. That was a part of the plan of God, a part of the immeasurable, illimitable grace and love of our Lord. "By His stripes we are healed."

But then is that all the world is ever to see of our Saviour—dying in shame on a cross? No! It is also a part of the plan of God that some day this unbelieving, this blaspheming, this godless world shall see the Son of God in His full character, in glory, in majesty, in the full-orbed wonder and marvel of His Godhead. Then all men shall look upon Him as He really is. They shall see Him holding in His hands the title-deed to the Universe, holding in His hands the authority of all creation in the universe above us, in the universe around us, and in the universe beneath us; holding this world and its destiny in His pierced and loving hands. (*Expository Sermons on Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969], 1:16–17)

Even a cursory glance through the book of Revelation reveals that Jesus Christ is its main theme. He is “the faithful witness” (1:5); “the firstborn of the dead” (1:5); “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5); “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8; 21:6); the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:8); “the Almighty” (1:8); “the first and the last” (1:17); “the living One” (1:18); “the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1); “the One who has the sharp two-edged sword” (2:12); “the Son of God” (2:18); the One “who has eyes like a flame of fire, and . . . feet . . . like burnished bronze” (2:18); the One “who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars” (3:1); the One “who is holy, who is true” (3:7); the holder of “the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens” (3:7); “the Amen, the faithful and true Witness” (3:14); “the Beginning of the creation of God” (3:14); “the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah” (5:5); “the Root of David” (5:5); the Lamb of God (e.g., 5:6; 6:1; 7:9–10; 8:1; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7; 21:9; 22:1); the “Lord, holy and true” (6:10); the One who “is called Faithful and True” (19:11); “The Word of God” (19:13); the “King of kings, and Lord of lords” (19:16); Christ (Messiah), ruling on earth with His glorified saints (20:6); and “Jesus . . . the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (22:16). The book of Revelation reveals the majesty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in song, poetry, symbolism, and prophecy. In it the heavens are opened and its readers see, as did Stephen (Acts 7:56), visions of the risen, glorified Son of God.

ITS DIVINE SOURCE

which God gave Him (1:1c)

In what sense is the book of Revelation a gift from the Father to Jesus Christ? Some interpret the phrase **which God gave Him** in connection with Jesus’ words in Mark 13:32: “But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” In the humiliation of His incarnation, when He “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant” (Phil. 2:7), Jesus restricted the independent use of His divine attributes. In the book of Revelation, those holding this view argue, the Father finally gave Jesus the information He lacked in His incarnation and humiliation.

There are two insurmountable difficulties with that view, however. The most obvious one is that the book of Revelation nowhere gives the day or hour of Christ’s return. Thus, it does not contain the very information the Father was supposedly revealing to the Son. Further, the glorified,

ascended Son resumed the full use of His divine attributes more than half a century before the book of Revelation was written. Being fully God and omniscient, He had no need for anyone to give Him any information.

In reality, the book of Revelation is the Father's gift to the Son in a far deeper, more marvelous sense. As a reward for His perfect, humble, faithful, holy service, the Father promised to exalt the Son. Paul explains,

Christ Jesus, . . . although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5–11)

Christ's exaltation, promised in the last three verses (9–11) of that passage, is described in detail in the book of Revelation. It thus contains the full disclosure of the glory that will be Christ's at His return—His ultimate reward from the Father for His faithfulness during His humiliation. The first token of the Father's pleasure with the obedient Son was His resurrection; the second was His ascension; the third was the sending of the Holy Spirit; and the last was the gift of the book of Revelation, which promises and reveals the glory that will be Christ's at His second coming.

The book of Revelation, then, details the Son's inheritance from the Father. Unlike most human wills, however, this document can be read because it is not a sealed, private document. But not everyone has the privilege of understanding it, only those to whom God unveils it by His Spirit.

ITS HUMAN RECIPIENTS

to show to His bond-servants, (1:1d)

To further exalt and glorify His Son, the Father has graciously granted to a special group of people the privilege of understanding the truths found in this book. John describes those people as **His** [Christ's] **bond-servants**. *Doulois* (**bond-servants**) literally means "slaves" (cf. Matt. 22:8; Mark 13:34). The *doulos* (bond-servant), however, was a special type of slave—one who served out of love and devotion to his master.

Exodus 21:5–6 describes such slaves: “But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.”

This is why unbelievers find the book of Revelation incomprehensible; it was not intended for them. It was given by the Father to the Son to **show** to those who willingly serve Him. Those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord cannot expect to comprehend this book. “A natural man,” explains Paul, “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). To His disciples, when on earth, Jesus said, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. . . . Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Matt. 13:11, 13). Unbelievers couldn’t grasp what Jesus meant when He was teaching about present spiritual realities. Neither can they grasp the future realities. Divine truth is hidden from the worldly-wise. The unbelieving skeptic finds in the book of Revelation nothing but chaos and confusion. But to the loving, willing **bond-servants** of Jesus Christ, this book is the understandable unveiling of prophetic truth about the future of the world.

ITS PROPHETIC CHARACTER

the things which must soon take place; (1:1e)

The book of Revelation’s emphasis on future events sets it apart from all other New Testament books. While they contain references to the future, the Gospels primarily focus on the life and earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Acts chronicles the history of the church from its beginnings on the day of Pentecost until the imprisonment at Rome of the apostle Paul. The New Testament epistles, like the Gospels, contain glimpses of the future. Their primary emphasis, however, is explaining the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and applying it to the life of the church in the present. Thus, the first five books of the New Testament are about the past, and the next twenty-one about the present. The last book, though it contains some information about the past (chap. 1) and the present (the seven churches in chaps. 2–3; although actual historical churches of John’s day, they depict the types of churches found throughout the church age), focuses on the future (chaps. 4–22).

As in all prophetic literature, there is a dual emphasis in the book of Revelation. It portrays Jesus Christ in His future glory along with the blessedness of the saints. It also depicts the judgment of unbelievers in Jesus Christ leading to their eternal damnation. Commentator Charles Erdman notes:

This is a book of judgments and of doom. The darker side of the picture is never for a moment concealed. God is just. Sin must be punished. Impenitence and rebellion issue in misery and defeat. Here is no sentimental confusion of right and wrong. Here is no weak tolerance of evil. There is mention of "the Lamb that hath been slain," but also of "the wrath of the Lamb." There is a "river of water of life," but also a "lake of fire." Here is revealed a God of love who is to dwell among men, to wipe away all tears, and to abolish death and sorrow and pain; but first his enemies must be subdued. Indeed, The Revelation is in large measure a picture of the last great conflict between the forces of evil and the power of God. The colors are lurid and are borrowed from the convulsions of nature and from the scenes of human history, with their battles and their carnage. The struggle is titanic. Countless hordes of demonic warriors rise in opposition to him who is "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords." Upon them "woes" are pronounced, "bowls" of wrath are poured out, and overwhelming destruction is visited. A brighter day is to come, but there is thunder before the dawn. (*The Revelation of John* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966], 12)

The profound and compelling truths in the book of Revelation are thus bittersweet (cf. 10:9–10).

Soon translates *tachos*, which can mean "in a brief time," or "quickly." It is true that there is a certain brevity to the future events depicted in this book. The unprecedented, unimaginable judgments that sweep the earth do so in a brief period of time. In just seven years, the evil world system is deluged by the horrific wrath of God. Even the thousand-year earthly kingdom is brief by God's standards (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8). It is also true that the Rapture, when Christ returns for His church, takes place "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52).

But that is not the primary meaning of *tachos* in this context. The idea is not the speed with which Christ moves when He comes, but the nearness of His coming. The use of *tachos* and related words in Revelation supports the understanding of its meaning here as "soon." In 2:16, Jesus warned the church at Pergamum to "repent; or else I am coming to you quickly," while in 3:11 He comforted the faithful church at Philadelphia by telling them, "I am coming quickly." Chapter 11, verse 14, declares, "The second woe is past; behold, the third woe is coming quickly." An angel told John that "the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take

place” (22:6). The Lord Jesus Christ three times declared, “I am coming quickly” (22:7, 12, 20). In all those cases *tachos* (or words related to it) clearly refers to the imminence or nearness of an event, not the speed at which it happens. The *tachos* word group is used in a similar sense throughout the New Testament (e.g., Acts 17:15; 25:4; Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 4:19; Phil. 2:19, 24; 1 Tim. 3:14; 2 Tim. 4:9; Heb. 13:19, 23; 2 Pet. 1:14). Thus, **the things which must soon take place** about which John wrote do not happen in a brief time span, but are imminent (cf. 1:3; 22:6).

Believers are not to try to set the “times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7). Instead, they are at all times to heed their Lord’s warning to “be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (Matt. 24:42). The knowledge that the events depicted in the book of Revelation are **soon to take place** has and should motivate Christians to live holy, obedient lives (2 Pet. 3:14).

ITS SUPERNATURAL DELIVERY

and He sent and communicated it by His angel (1:1f)

The book of Revelation is unique in New Testament literature because it is the only book **sent and communicated** to its human author by angels. In 22:16 Jesus reaffirmed the truth taught here, declaring, “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches.” Angels were involved in the giving of the book of Revelation to John just as they were in the giving of the Law to Moses (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). Not only were angels involved in transmitting the book of Revelation to John, but they also play a prominent role in the scenes it depicts. Angels appear in every chapter of Revelation except 4 and 13. The words *angel* or *angels* are used seventy-one times in the book of Revelation—more than in any other book in the Bible. In fact, one out of every four uses in Scripture of those words is in the book of Revelation. This book, then, is an important source of information on the ministry of angels.

ITS HUMAN AUTHOR

to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. (1:1g-2)

The human agent to whom the angelic messengers communicated the book of Revelation is here identified as **His** [Christ’s] **bond-**

servant John. As noted in the Introduction, this was John the apostle, the son of Zebedee and brother of James. As also noted in the Introduction, John wrote the book of Revelation while in exile on the island of Patmos (1:9).

The enormity of the visions John received on that barren island staggered him. Throughout his gospel, John never directly referred to himself. Yet here he bookends his vision with the statement, “I, John” (1:9; 22:8)—an exclamation that expressed his amazement that he was receiving such overwhelming visions.

As he had loyally **testified** to the first coming of Christ (John 19:35; 21:24; 1 John 1:2; 4:14), so John faithfully, under the Spirit’s inspiration, testified **to all that he saw** concerning His second coming. Specifically, John bore witness **to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ.** Those phrases appear together again in 1:9 (cf. 12:17), and are used synonymously, since “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (19:10). The **word of God** expressed in the book of Revelation is **the testimony** about the coming glory of **Jesus Christ** given to His church (cf. 22:16) and recorded by His faithful witness, John.

ITS PROMISED BLESSING

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; (1:3a)

The book of Revelation is bracketed by promises of blessing (beatitudes, as in Matt. 5:3–12) to those who read and obey it (cf. 22:7; Luke 11:28). But those are only two of the seven promises of blessing the book contains; the rest are equally wonderful: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on! ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them’” (14:13). “Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame” (16:15); “blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9); “blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection” (20:6); “blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city” (22:14).

The three participles translated **reads, hear, and heed** are in the present tense. Reading, hearing, and obeying the truths taught in the book of Revelation (and in the rest of Scripture) are to be a way of life for believers. The change from the singular **he who reads** to the plural **those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things**

which are written in it depicts a first-century church service. It was common practice when the church gathered for one person to read the Scriptures aloud for all to hear (cf. 1 Tim. 4:13). Dr. Robert L. Thomas explains that “because writing materials were expensive and scarce, so were copies of the books that were parts of the biblical canon. As a rule, one copy per Christian assembly was the best that could be hoped for. Public reading was the only means that rank-and-file Christians had for becoming familiar with the contents of these books” (*Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 60). Since only Scripture was to be publicly read, John’s “obvious intention that the Apocalypse was to be read publicly argued strongly from the start that it be included among those books that eventually would be recognized as part of the NT canon” (Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 62–63).

The book of Revelation is God’s final word to man, the culmination of divine revelation. Its writing marked the completion of the canon of Scripture (cf. 22:18–19), and its scope encompasses the entire future sweep of redemptive history (1:19). Therefore it is imperative that believers pay diligent heed to the truths it contains.

ITS COMPELLING URGENCY

for the time is near. (1:3b)

This phrase reiterates the truth taught in 1:1, that the events depicted in the book of Revelation are imminent. **Time** does not translate *chronos*, which refers to time on a clock or calendar, but *kairos*, which refers to seasons, epochs, or eras. The next great era of God’s redemptive history is **near**.

That the return of Christ is imminent, the next event on God’s prophetic calendar, has always been the church’s hope. Jesus commanded His followers to watch expectantly for His return:

Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect. (Luke 12:35–40)

“The night is almost gone,” wrote Paul to the Romans, “and the day is near” (Rom. 13:12). The apostle thought that he might be alive when the Lord returns, as his use of the plural pronoun *we* in such passages as 1 Corinthians 15:51–58 and 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18 indicates. The writer of Hebrews exhorted his readers to “[encourage] one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25). James encouraged struggling believers with the reality that Christ’s return was imminent: “Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. . . . You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. . . . Behold, the Judge is standing right at the door” (James 5:7–9). “The end of all things is near,” Peter reminded his readers (1 Pet. 4:7), while in 1 John 2:18 the apostle John added, “Children, it is the last hour.”

Despite the skepticism of the scoffers, who demand, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation” (2 Pet. 3:4), the Lord Jesus Christ will return. And His return is **near**.

ITS TRINITARIAN BENEDICTION

John to the seven churches that 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, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:4–5a)

Unlike modern letters, in which the senders put their names at the end of the letter, ancient letters sensibly named their writers at the beginning. Thus **John** identifies himself as the writer and names **the seven churches** (listed in 1:11) **that are** in the Roman province of **Asia** (modern Turkey) as the recipients. **Grace to you and peace** was a standard greeting in New Testament letters (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; Philem. 3), but this greeting introduces a benediction from the exalted Trinity (cf. 2 Cor. 13:14).

The phrase **Him who is and who was and who is to come** identifies the first Person of the Trinity, God the Father, described here in anthropomorphic terms. Because it is the only way we can understand, the threefold description (cf. 1:8; 4:8) views God in time dimensions (past, present, and future), although He is timeless. The eternal God is the source of all the blessings of salvation, all grace, and all peace.

The seven Spirits who are before His throne refers to the Holy Spirit. Obviously, there is only one Holy Spirit; the number **seven**

depicts Him in His fullness (cf. 5:6; Isa. 11:2; Zech. 4:1-10). The Holy Spirit in all His glory and fullness sends grace and peace to believers; He is the spirit of grace (Heb. 10:29) and produces peace in believers' lives (Gal. 5:22). Here He is seen in the glory of His place in the Father's presence in heaven.

Grace and peace also flow **from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth**. He, too, is seen in the glory of His exaltation. It is only fitting that John mentions Christ last, and gives a fuller description of Him, since He is the theme of the book of Revelation. A **faithful witness** is one who always speaks and represents the truth, and that certainly characterizes the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a perfect witness to the nature of God. Revelation 3:14 calls Him "The Amen, the faithful and true Witness." "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world," He declared to Pilate, "to testify to the truth" (John 18:37). Jesus Christ, the faithful witness who cannot lie and lived and spoke flawlessly the will of God, promises believers salvation's grace and peace.

The second description of Jesus, **the firstborn of the dead**, does not mean He was chronologically the first one to be raised from the dead. There were resurrections before His in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17:17-23; 2 Kings 4:32-36; 13:20-21), and He Himself raised others during His earthly ministry (Matt. 9:23-25; Luke 7:11-15; John 11:30-44). *Prōtotokos* does not mean **firstborn** in time sequence, but rather first in preeminence. Of all who have ever been or ever will be resurrected, He is the premier one. God declares of the Messiah in Psalm 89:27, "I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." The book of Revelation records the unfolding of that promise.

The third title, **the ruler of the kings of the earth**, depicts Christ as absolutely sovereign over the affairs of this world, to which He holds the title deed (cf. 5:1ff.). That Jesus Christ is the sovereign King of the earth is repeatedly taught in Scripture (e.g., 19:16; Ps. 2:6-8; Jer. 23:5; Zech. 9:9; Matt. 2:2; 21:5; Luke 19:38; 23:3; John 1:49). He is Lord, having a name "above every name" (Phil. 2:9-11), who, according to the Father's plan and the Spirit's work, grants believers His royal blessing of grace and peace.

ITS EXALTED DOXOLOGY

To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1:5b-6)

The work of Christ on behalf of believers caused John to burst forth in an inspired doxology of praise to Him. In the present, Christ loves believers with an unbreakable love (Rom. 8:35-39). The greatest expression of that love came when He **released us from our sins by His blood**—a reference to the atonement provided by His sacrificial death on the cross on our behalf.

Here is the heart of the gospel. Sinners are forgiven by God, set free from sin, death, and hell by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. God made Him our substitute, killing Him for our sins, so that the penalty was fully paid for us. God's justice was satisfied and God was able then to grant righteousness to repentant sinners for whom Christ died.

Christ's love also caused Him to make **us to be a kingdom** (not the millennial kingdom, but the sphere of God's rule which believers enter at salvation; cf. Col. 1:13) in which we enjoy His loving, gracious rule and almighty, sovereign protection. Finally, He made us **priests to His God and Father**, granting us the privilege of direct access to the Father (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-10).

John concludes his doxology with the only proper response in light of the magnitude of the blessings Christ has given believers: **To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.** That is to be the response of all who read this marvelous book in which that future glory and dominion is clearly presented.