

Revelation 1:4-8 “The Return of the King”

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The Return of the King is the final book and movie in the epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. The fate of Middle Earth hangs in the balance. Sauron’s forces of darkness gather at the gates of Gondor’s capital where the destiny of the free world shall be decided. But the battle goes ill, and it appears that there is no hope of victory *until* the “Return of the King.” Lord Aragorn, the rightful heir to the throne, reclaims his birthright by leading the Army of the Dead to Gondor’s rescue, overcoming their enemies. After which Aragorn leads an attack against the Black Gate as a diversion, drawing out the armies of darkness and emptying Mordor so that Frodo might reach Mt. Doom and destroy the Ring of Power and thereby conquer the forces of evil finally. The world is restored to order, peace and harmony, by the “Return of the King.”

Well in our text today, we have another “Return of the King”—at least a preview of it. When we examine the text, we learn that *because the King of Kings shall return to conquer His enemies, then you and I should repent and believe in Him!*

The Seven Churches of Asia

We are still establishing the context of the letter. This is a real letter sent to actual people. In vv. 4-8 we find the greeting, the salutation. Which shows to whom the letter is written. Verse 4, *John to the seven churches that are in Asia*. The letter is addressed to the churches of Asia. In this reference to *Asia*, John doesn’t mean the Far East, as China. John writes within the first century Roman Empire, Asia is one of its territories—what is now the western part of Asia Minor. Modern Turkey, the west side. John writes to the seven churches located in Western Turkey: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Yet there are other churches in Asia Minor of equal significance not addressed in this letter. The church in Colossae to which the Apostle Paul writes an epistle to the *Colossians*. And there is Hierapolis, Troas. Why does John exclude them? These seven churches are located on the major trade route. The interstate that connects the most influential cities of the province. After one church receives the letter it could be easily forwarded to the next church down the road. Also, as mentioned last week, 7 is a dominant number in the book, used 54 times; a symbolic number, conveying the idea of wholeness, completeness, perfection. This letter is not limited to these seven churches, but applies to all the churches of Asia Minor in completion; in totality, the fullness of the churches. These seven churches are reflective of all churches worldwide, throughout the ages. Any congregation can look at these seven churches and see its own reflection to some extent.

O that every church in America would consider the message to the churches in Asia. For of these seven churches, not one exists today. They’re all dead. Sobering thought, the very churches of the Apocalypse, these founded by the apostles, the very churches to which John writes; gone. Their former locations are but tourist traps for secular sightseers. Like Scotland today. In Aberdeen at Trinity Square, three former sanctuaries of once thriving congregations converted into restaurants, hotels, casinos. These seven churches in their context are critical to the interpretation of the letter. We can never understand it apart from the circumstances of the seven churches. Believers are being severely and bitterly persecuted. Some are wasting away in dingy dungeons (2:10). Antipas slain in the streets of Pergamum (2:13). Some are thrown to the

wild beasts (6:8). Many are beheaded, *And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because for the testimony of Jesus* (20:4). John writes to comfort, encourage, provide hope.

Which raises a critical question about the state of American evangelical church. If you were given the opportunity to say something to a congregation about to suffer persecution, what would you tell them? If somehow you knew in advance that some awaited imprisonment, exile, what message would you give? “Your Best Life Now,” urban renewal, climate-change? If you are not concerned the health and well-being of the Church, the very survival of Christianity, then you could tell them nothing relevant. So the apostle sets before these seven congregations a vision of *Christus Victor*, the victorious Christ. The triumphant Lamb. But he doesn’t wait until mid-letter to provide them any hope. He gives it here in the greeting. The hope and the comfort and the tone of victory spills over in the very greeting of the letter.

Grace and Peace from the Trinitarian God

Verse 4, *John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace.* The apostle proclaims grace and peace to these suffering Christians. Two blessings that encapsulate the gospel message: Grace, the unmerited favor of God which brings peace. Peace with whom? Their persecutors so as to enjoy peaceful, suburban lives? No. Peace with God. *Having been justified by faith we have peace with God* (Rom. 5:1). God and sinners reconciled. Hostility ended. No longer enemies. *There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus* (Rom. 8:1). Rather the enjoyment of adoption, the delight of a heavenly Father. The pleasure of His presence. Grace and peace, which is extended to the seven churches. Notice from whom. Not John. He cannot bestow grace or peace. Rather the source is the Trinitarian God, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit.

First source, Father. Verse 4, *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.* A crucial description that assures these believers of grace and peace. John could say grace and peace “from God,” instead he uses this designation that assures them of the blessing. For it is from *him who is, and who was, and who is to come*. These words are a paraphrase of God’s divine Name, Yahweh, Jehovah. Before the Exodus event, God appears to Moses in a burning bush. Moses asks His name. The burning response, I AM WHO I AM. The name is a form of the verb, “to be.” Utterly profound name that refers to the mystery of God’s Being, His “is-ness,” His existence, pre-existence, self-existence. Everlasting existence. God is. This concept is vital for these early believers to be reminded of. So critical that this description is repeated in Verse 8, *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”* Notice the repetition. Verse 4 the God who is, and who was, and who is to come. Verse 8, the God who is, and who was and who is to come. Repeated for emphasis. This description of God is how the greeting of the letter begins and ends; forming an inclusio. Like two decorative bookends on a shelf. The text, the very greeting of the letter is especially decorated by the beautiful bookends of the doctrine of God. Particularly, that of God’s eternal existence. His eternal “is-ness.” God is, eternally. Everlastingly, He is. His pre-existence is the source of everything that has come into Being.

All this is contained in one word, *Alpha*. Verse 8, *I am the Alpha*. The first letter of the Greek alphabet which conveys the idea that God is the beginning of all things. The beginning of everything that comes into existence. For modern secularism, this idea of a beginning is largely rejected. Some claim, “The cosmos is all there is. It has always existed, without beginning. Any

attempt to assign an Alpha point is arbitrary, construct.” Stephen Hawking, “So long as the universe had a beginning, we could suppose it has a creator.” (*Brief History of Time*, 140). Therein is his problem. If there is a beginning, an Alpha, then there is a God, who is eternally pre-existent, self-existent. So the skeptic is forced to invent alternative explanations of reality to eliminate the idea of a beginning. (Imaginary time, multiverse, oscillating universe, etc.)

But this raises a simple question. If there is no Alpha point, then how did we get here? There must be a starting point with something that is itself eternal and self-existent or the present moment never arrives. You cannot have a beginningless duration of time ending in the present. For example, the New Year is approaching. Suppose we take a field trip to Time Square in New York City to watch the Ball drop on New Year’s Eve. Scheduled to drop at 12:00 midnight. Normally the countdown would begin, -10, -9, -8, ...-3, -2, -1, 0. But on this coming New Year’s Eve, assuming there is a beginningless universe, we would countdown the time for ball to drop from infinity. But we might ask, “Why didn’t the ball drop yesterday?” By yesterday an infinite time would have already elapsed, so that the countdown should have finished. Still we could ask, “Why didn’t the ball drop the year before yesterday?” Because at that point an infinite time would have already elapsed. Yet we could ask, “Why didn’t it drop the century before the year before yesterday?” For even by then an infinite time would have already elapsed. We can keep regressing and regressing through endless corridors of time, with no beginning, backing up through years and centuries and millennium after millennium without reaching a starting point. Like an endless hall of mirrors, the further you look back the further there is still to go, receding out of sight. No matter how far back into the past we go to begin the countdown, we never see the ball drop, because the countdown from infinity would have already passed. You cannot countdown from infinity. You don’t have a starting point. It is always racing away from you at incalculable speed and distance. There you’re standing in Times Square, hoping to see ball drop, but you would never hear the countdown, you don’t even hear crickets, but complete silence since there is no today, there is no present. The idea of a beginningless duration of time ending in the present is totally absurd, irrational. If the universe did not begin with an Alpha, then the present moment would never arrive.

This idea of God as Alpha, His pre-existence is not just philosophical rhetoric. Rather the hope of these suffering Christians. They are facing persecution. The future is uncertain. They need to be reminded of the One who controls the future. An eternally existent God who brings everything into being out of nothing and who sovereignly controls the events of history. The Self-Existent God, the Pre-Existent God. From whom all other existence originates. From whom all power comes. This God is not merely the supreme in power. He possesses all power. Power is given by Him. The power of the Roman Empire. The power of the forces of darkness. They have no power but from Him. And He uses them willingly—and despite themselves—for His sovereign purpose. That is what these Christians need to know. Though all hell is unleashed against the church nothing can thwart God’s plan for the ages. For God is *the One who was and who is and who is to come*. The One about whom the psalmist can say, *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me* (Ps. 23). Comforting?

Second source, Spirit. Verse 4, *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*. The seven spirits is a reference to the Holy Spirit. Ambiguous, granted. For there is only one Holy Spirit. So does this contradict the doctrine of the Trinity? No. The number seven is symbolic indicating completion, perfection. The seven spirits symbolize the one Holy Spirit in the completeness of His being.

Imagery: John writes to the seven churches portrayed as the seven lampstands. How will they keep burning? By a continual supply of oil. So the seven lampstands correspondingly have seven spirits sent to supply oil, fuel. The seven spirits are the fullness of the one Holy Spirit, unendingly supplying seven churches with the divine fuel of grace and peace. How will these churches be sustained during persecution? *“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit” says the Lord.*

Third source, the Son. Verse 5, and from Jesus Christ. Usually in discussions of the Trinity, the persons are listed in order of Father, Son, Spirit. Here they are Father, Spirit, Son. Why out of order? Because John plans to continue focusing on the Son for the rest of the chapter—glorious vision of the Son of Man. For now, notice Jesus is given a threefold title. Verse 5, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness. Here is the very purpose of Jesus’ life, witness—as He tells Pilate. *For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear **witness** to the truth* (Jn. 18:37). Yet there is more to this witness, for the book is written to encourage faithful witness in the face of persecution. For example, *You did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas **my faithful witness**, who was killed among you* (2:13). Antipas is commended as a *faithful witness* who was martyred. Indeed, the Greek word for witness is *martyrs* from which is derived the English word *martyr*. One who suffers death for faithful witness. So Jesus is presented as the ultimate *faithful witness*, the example of how to stand fast and never renounce the faith. Second title: *the firstborn of the dead*. Antipas, the faithful witness is martyred and remains dead, physically. Jesus the faithful witness is martyred and rises from the dead. Though others rise from the dead (Lazarus), they eventually die again. Yet Jesus is resurrected to remain alive. So that He can be called *first-born of the dead*. Doesn’t refer to sequence of resurrection but status of those resurrected. Like a first-born son, Jesus has status and Lordship over death, for He conquered death for the martyrs who will reign with Him (Rev. 20:4). Third title (climax building). *The ruler of kings on earth*. The ruler of kings is the King of Kings. Relevant? These first century believers are being persecuted because of the foreign policy of the megalomaniac dictator, Domitian, who re-enforces Emperor worship. Every Roman citizen must burn incense to Domitian and bow the knee in an act of obeisance and confess that “Caesar is Lord.” But Christians refuse. For which they are bitterly persecuted. Might it just be a wee bit comforting to know that Jesus is *the ruler of the kings of the earth* and that ultimately Domitian must bow the knee to Him?—Along with *every knee in heaven, on earth, and under the earth and confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father* (Phil. 2:10). Comforting?

Christ’s Coming

When will that happen? At the “Return of the King!” Verse 7, Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. This verse is a conflation, the blending of two Old Testament verses into one. John quotes from Dan. 7:13-14, the second from Zech. 12:10. We recognize the first phrase, as a reference to Daniel’s night vision which was read last week in Old Testament reading, *Behold, he is coming with the clouds*. The mention of the cloud is very significant. In the Old Testament, God’s presence is symbolized by a cloud. In wilderness wanderings, a pillar of cloud by day. So in Daniel’s night vision he sees a divine being coming with the clouds, but he looks like a Son of Man, he looks human and not the other bizarre beasts. Divine and human at the same time: God-Man. The infinite God-Man to whom is given all

authority, power, and glory and who comes to judge the world. But then Daniels prophecy is combined with that of Zechariah 12:10, *and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him*. Undoubtedly, this is a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus, when His side was pierced by a spear to ensure death. According to Zechariah, as a result of Jesus' death, the citizens of Jerusalem will mourn in repentance. Which is fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 Jews came to faith in Christ. Response to Peter's message? What shall we do? And Peter said to them, "*Repent*" (Acts 2:38). The mourning of repentance that Zechariah has in view is the mourning of repentance fulfilled at Pentecost. But the mourning that John has in view is not that of repentance, but of remorse, dread, fear. In the Greek, this wailing means "a beating upon the breast." Smiting oneself upon the realization that divine justice is poured out.

There are some who would say that this coming was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. It doesn't refer to a visible, personal coming of Christ, but to a coming in judgment, fulfilled when the Roman general Titus conquered Jerusalem in AD 70. But that interpretation fails in that John doesn't limit this judgment to Jerusalem. He broadens the scope. *Verse 7, ... and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him*. The mourning at the coming of Christ isn't limited to the inhabitants of Jerusalem or even the nation of Israel. It is applied globally to all the tribes of the earth. All the ethnic groups, all the tribes divided by tongue, territory. There will be international mourning. Global mourning.

Why? Because *every eye will see him*. Everyone. The soldiers who pierce Him at the cross, the Jews who are responsible for His death. Those who pierce Christ's body over and over again by attacking His body, the Church. Those in every age that have pierced Christ's body, the church, with careless indifference. Those who pierce His body over and over with rejection. *Every eye will see Him*. Every person who has ever lived throughout time across the planet. They will see Him with their own eyes. The infinite God-Man, the reigning Christ, the return of the King. He will once again enter into our world. He will step into our present existence from another dimension of reality where He currently awaits. A parallel universe where He now tarries at the right hand of God the Father. From thence, He will break through the bubble-like barrier and enter this dimension in mind-boggling majesty, such shock and awe. An event so terrible the nations of the earth will wail. The all glorious, second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ will set the human race in a panic! Arising from the earth echoing into the atmosphere will be faint fanatical screams of wailing.

John's Response

What is John's response? *Verse 7, ...Even so. Amen*. In the Greek text, this phrase is two words. Before *amen*, is the word, *vai*. Which means *yes* followed by the Hebrew word, *amen*, which means, *let it be*. One word would be sufficient to convey John's attitude. But both together emphasize John's vigorous, enthusiastic, whole-hearted approval. "Yes, Let it be!" In our snowflake culture, some evangelicals might say, "That's a micro-aggression and not very sensitive." Others would consider themselves too woke for this hearty approval. That is because they are more influenced by the therapeutic culture than they are glory of God. Sensitivity, wokeness is not a sign of sanctification. Remember that we have not seen our fathers executed, moms imprisoned, siblings carried away by the state authorities, homes burned. In that context, the return of Christ is the blessed hope of the early church. For then, the suffering of these Christians will be vindicated in the judgment of the defiant, God-haters. To condemn John's

approval is not an evidence of greater godliness, instead evidence of how little one really knows God. God is just. Justice flows from His being. He must execute justice because of His nature. *Just is He*. There is no contradiction within God. He cannot deny Himself. He must execute universal and infinite justice because of Who He is. He does so in one of two ways, either in the cross of His Son, or in the destruction of His enemies. The question is not, “How can John say ‘Yes and Amen!’ at the thought of God’s judgment?” Wrong question. The proper question is, “Am I God’s enemy? Am I indifferent to Christ?”

So beloved I urge you to look to the clouds and watch for the Christ that John sees. For the return of Christ *is as sure as the dawn* (Hos. 6:3). A truth so absolute that John says, *Behold, He is coming*. So I urge you, fix this picture in your mind’s eye: The Return of the King coming in the clouds causing the nations of the earth to wail and mourn. Let it be so seared into your conscience so that you can see the “Return of the King” in every waking moment. May it cause you to mourn. For if you do not mourn now in repentance, then you will mourn later in remorse. Amen.