

Letters from Heaven

Revelation 1:4-8

Ever been waiting on a letter or message that was extremely important to you? Maybe an exciting opportunity in your life, a letter from someone you love, or a word of hope in a desperate situation? That was where the seven churches of Revelation were living. They were under severe persecution and opposition, and to top it off, their pastor and friend, John, had now been taken from them and imprisoned on the Island of Patmos never to be seen again. Who could they turn to and who would be their encouragement? This was not only John's concern, but more importantly, it was the Lord's concern for His church. So, He now sends these *letters from heaven* to encourage His embattled bride. Although John was the one God used to physically write Revelation, as we will clearly see, it was Jesus Himself who wrote the letters. A letter is only as important to us as the one who is writing it. When the seven churches understand this is coming directly from the Lord, they will be extremely excited! And since this is written for us as well, we too should be extremely excited!

In verse four, John says this is to the seven churches in Asia. The area he is speaking of was western Asia or Asia Minor - modern day Turkey. Look at a map, and you will see they were located fairly close together. As the Lord begins writing, He moves in a circular motion, starting with Ephesus and moving clockwise until the circle is complete. That gives a clear picture of what the Lord was doing through these letters since the number seven is the number of completion. The Lord was not only sending a message to these specific seven, but to the entire or complete body - not only in John's day, but throughout history. How do we know this? We can look back in history and see that each church, in order, perfectly matches and describes all the periods of church history. We will discuss that more once we actually get to the letters.

Church history reveals that John visited these seven and ministered to them as an additional overseeing pastor. So, this was more than just letters delivered from the Lord, they came from a loved and trusted friend as well. This would have made them all the more valuable to them. Knowing that John was going through severe persecution would have made his encouragement all the more important. If John could be so persecuted and still encourage them, it showed they could do the same through the power of Jesus. If John was indeed boiled in oil and now doing hard labor in a prison camp and had hope and joy, how could they not? But you can understand why they could have been discouraged. Christians at this time were being killed in most every imaginable way. Nero was emperor, before Domitian, and he actually burned Christians alive in the evenings simply to light his garden! And Domitian was just as bad! The churches had reason to be discouraged.

This explains John's salutation of grace and peace from the Lord! How the church needed such words during this time of persecution. This would have been a sweet sound to their ears! How well we learn to walk in grace directly affects how much peace we truly have. If we understand God's grace and love for us, it opens the door for God's peace. Until we understand that, true spiritual peace will never come. And to make this even better, it literally means sanctifying grace and tranquilizing peace. Sanctification is a continual process of making us more and more like the Lord, and tranquilizing speaks of how completely relaxed and rested we are in His peace. They truly needed it at a time like this. Notice who He says this grace and peace is coming from - Him *Who is, Who was, and Who is to come*. Who is this? It is none other than Jesus Christ. Since He *was, is, and is to come*, that means He has always existed and always will exist. If He says we can have grace and peace in the midst of such difficult times, we know it is possible. That is a message we ALL need to hear! By pointing out that He was not only currently with them, but was to come, it would not only give them hope right then but for the future since He was coming back! And this should give each of us hope as well!

Lastly, he mentions the seven spirits which are before the throne. What in the world is this talking about? No doubt it is in reference to Isaiah 11:2 where, speaking of Jesus, it says, *The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord*. In other words, the complete work of the Holy Spirit manifested in and through Jesus.

Notice how Jesus is described in verse five:

- **The faithful Witness** – All He said and says is true, so we can trust it
- **The Firstborn from the dead** – The first to rise from the dead in a new body to live eternally
- **The Ruler over the kings of the earth**

How exciting this would have been to the early church as they were under the oppression of Caesar Domitian and were now being reminded that even he was ultimately under Jesus. But also, how exciting for us to realize the One Who was, and is, and is to come is STILL over all the rulers of the world today! He is the One Who loved us, and how He loves us! Look at the last descriptor!

- **He washed us from our sins in His OWN blood!**

Not only did He love us so much, that He forgave our sins, but He paid for them with His OWN blood! He didn't leave it for someone else to do; He did it HIMSELF!

The next verse says He not only died for us and saved us with His own blood, but He then gave us glory and honor with Him! Amazing! First it says He has made us kings! It is hard for us to get too excited as men about this analogy because we have no real kings to look to as an example, but it is a little easier for women. How so? There is still a queen and multiple princesses in our world to view and examine. I see how excited women get about princesses! The world's women were enamored with Lady Diana, and it is repeated again with Kate Middleton and Meghan Markle. Even though understanding the excitement of being a king might be hard, we get a taste of this honor with Lady Di.

But He continues to call us priests! This too can be hard for us to get excited about since what it means to be a priest has changed greatly since then, but to the Jew, there was no greater honor. Why? Well, because they were the nearest to God, honored by God, and honored by the people for their position. And now that is what God has made each of you who know Him!

It is interesting how a priest was washed or spiritually cleansed for service to God. They would put blood on their toe, thumb, and ear. Since blood is what cleanses spiritually, by doing this they were symbolically and ritually saying that they needed to be pure in their walk, in what they did with their hands, and in what they heard or allowed to enter their mind. And we, as God's priests, should be no different today, watching our walk with God, what we do with our hands for God, and what we allow into our lives or ears for God.

Now that we know we are kings and priests to God, the question is are we conducting ourselves as such? We should be, because that is who we now are! Notice suddenly he begins to spontaneously praise the Lord. To Him be glory and dominion forever! Why is he doing this? As he is writing, it hits him how great our God is who has done great things for us. If we truly understood this, we would do the same!

Now, in verse seven, John speaks with confidence as he reports He is coming with clouds. You can rest assured that the Lord IS indeed coming back! When He comes, there will be clouds of glory in heaven! Every eye will see Him - even those who pierced or crucified Him! The living AND the dead will see the Lord upon His return! The first time the Lord came He was not revealed to everyone. Only those who believed truly saw Him for Whom He was.

At the Rapture, the Bible says that only the saved will see Him. But at His Second Coming, Scripture says that ALL eyes will see Him! The living AND the dead! How awesome will that be! It even says those who actually crucified or pierced Him will see Him at that time! Can you imagine the look on their faces! And this explains what he says next. *They will mourn because of Him*. Literally it means they will *beat their breasts in mourning*. You see, when Jesus comes back, our response to Him will depend on what we did with Him before that! If we loved and served Him, we will rejoice! But if we ignored or rejected Him, we will mourn our opportunity to be saved from our sin and live forever with God. In Zechariah, we see exactly this with the Jews at His return.

Turn with me to Zechariah 12:10.

The Lord ends this segment, in verse eight, with an amazing and magnificent description of Himself. He is the *Alpha and the Omega*. These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet in which this was written. He was saying He is not only the beginning and the end of all things, but all things are found in Him and wrapped up in Him! What a GREAT description of Jesus! It all began with Him as the Creator of all things, and it will all end with Him sitting on the throne! This only magnifies how important it is for us to love and honor Him! And notice He ends by calling Himself the Almighty. There are those who say that Jesus never claimed to be God and that the Bible never declared Jesus to be God. Not according to this! It doesn't get any clearer! And this is our God, and this is our Jesus!

Do you need a letter from heaven today? If so, you've got one! It is the book of Revelation. Jesus didn't just write this to the seven churches of Asia in John's day, but He has written to YOU! No matter your situation, you need to realize that He has not only forgiven and saved you, but He has made you kings and priests unto God forever in His Kingdom! If that doesn't make you rejoice, NOTHING will!

Group Study and Personal Application Questions:

1. The church in John's day was heavily persecuted. What purpose did the "letters from heaven" serve? Why is it important to know these letters are from Jesus? How does this apply to the church today?
2. V4 – The 7 churches being written to were located in Asia. In what part of Asia were they located?
3. Describe the order of the letters in regard to the geographical locations of the churches. What picture is presented by the order and number of churches?
4. How was John the perfect "tool" used by Jesus to convey these letters? (Two traits)
5. Why are the words *grace* and *peace* in John's salutation important?
6. Relate an experience of duress where God's grace and peace became evident.
7. Pastor Mark identified the grace as "sanctifying" and the peace as "tranquilizing". Explain these 2 terms.
8. Jesus is described as "Who is and who was and who is to come". What one word can be used to summarize all these?
9. The "seven Spirits" in verse 4 is most likely a reference to Isaiah 11:2. What are they representative of?
10. V5 – What is the significance of Jesus being described as the faithful Witness? As the Firstborn from the dead? As the Ruler over the kings of the earth?
11. What is significant about Him who loved us and washed us from our sins?
12. V6 – Just being saved should give us all the joy and hope we could ever need, but what else has Jesus done for us?
13. Old Testament priests had blood applied to 3 body parts. What were they and what do they represent as far as our service to God?
14. V7 – What assurance are we given in verse 7?
15. Very few people recognized who Jesus was when He came the first time. How many will recognize Him the second time? How will the Jews react this time?
16. V8 – John ends this little portion of Scripture as if his description of Jesus is in uppercase letters. Why should all these descriptors be important to someone who is wondering who Jesus is? Who is Jesus declaring himself to be?

In the midst of any trial, we all need hope that everything is going to be alright. No matter how bad things seem to be, Christians can have the greatest of peace. John, in these verses, stated that Jesus will come, He is faithful, He loves us, He has something for us to do in His kingdom, and He is the Almighty.

- How should all that influence the way we should live?